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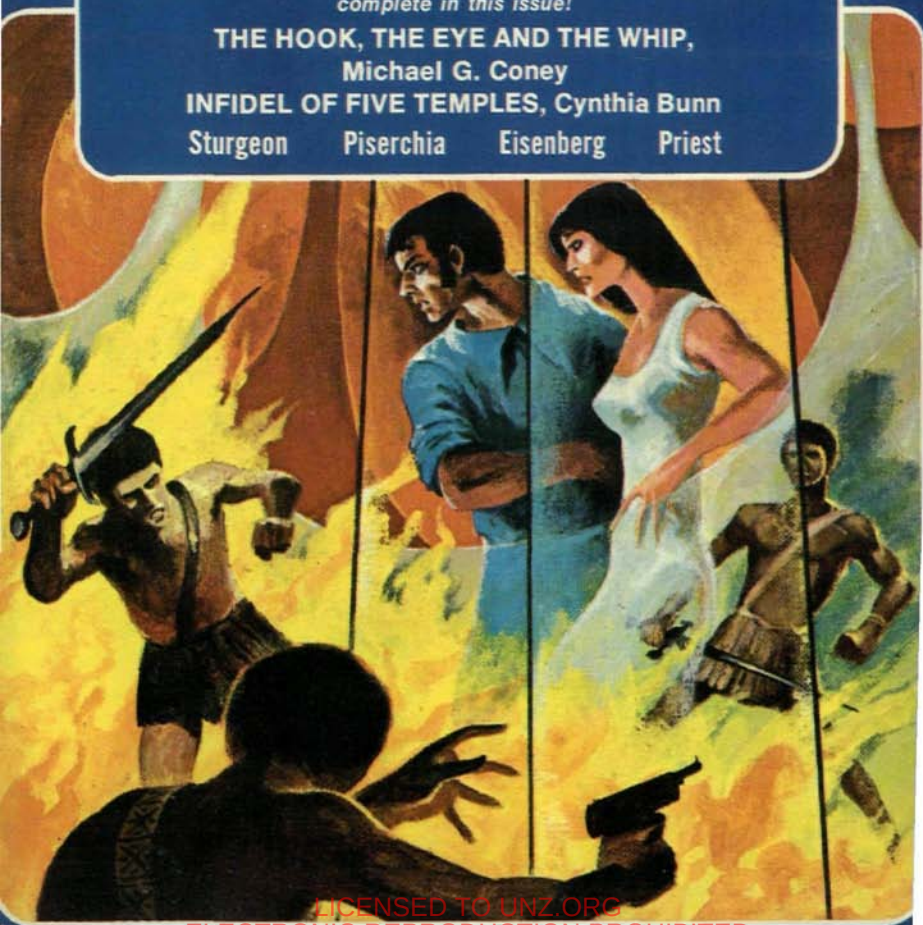

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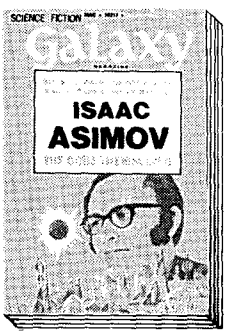

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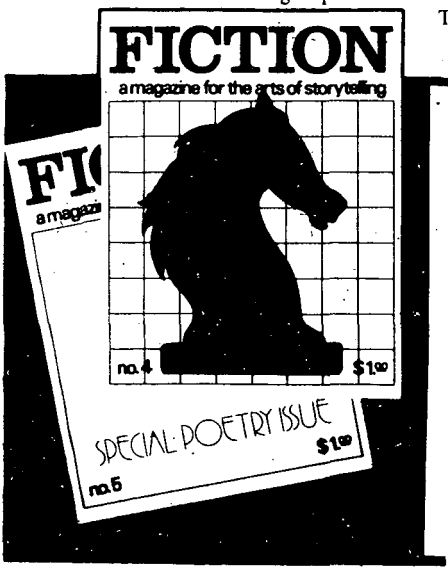

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Galaxy SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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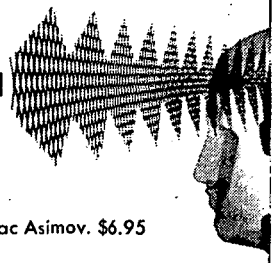

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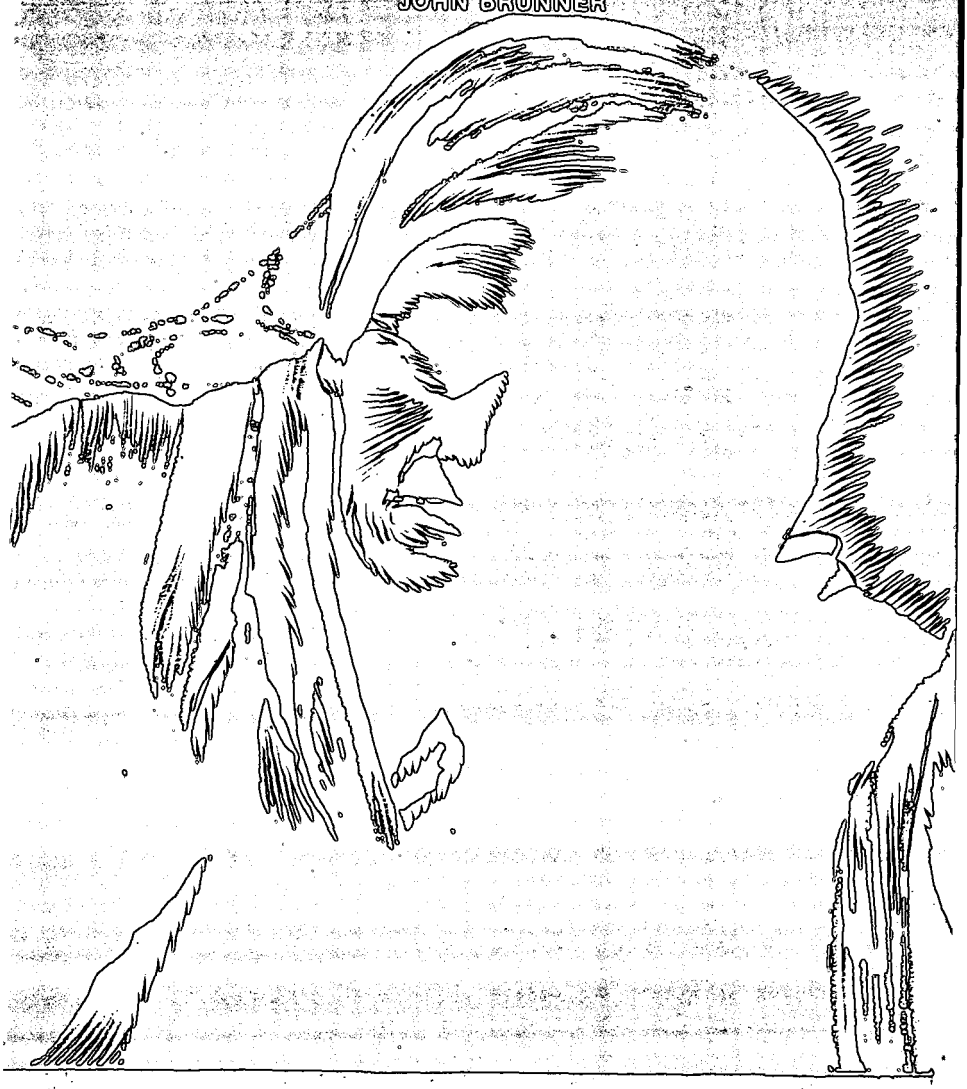

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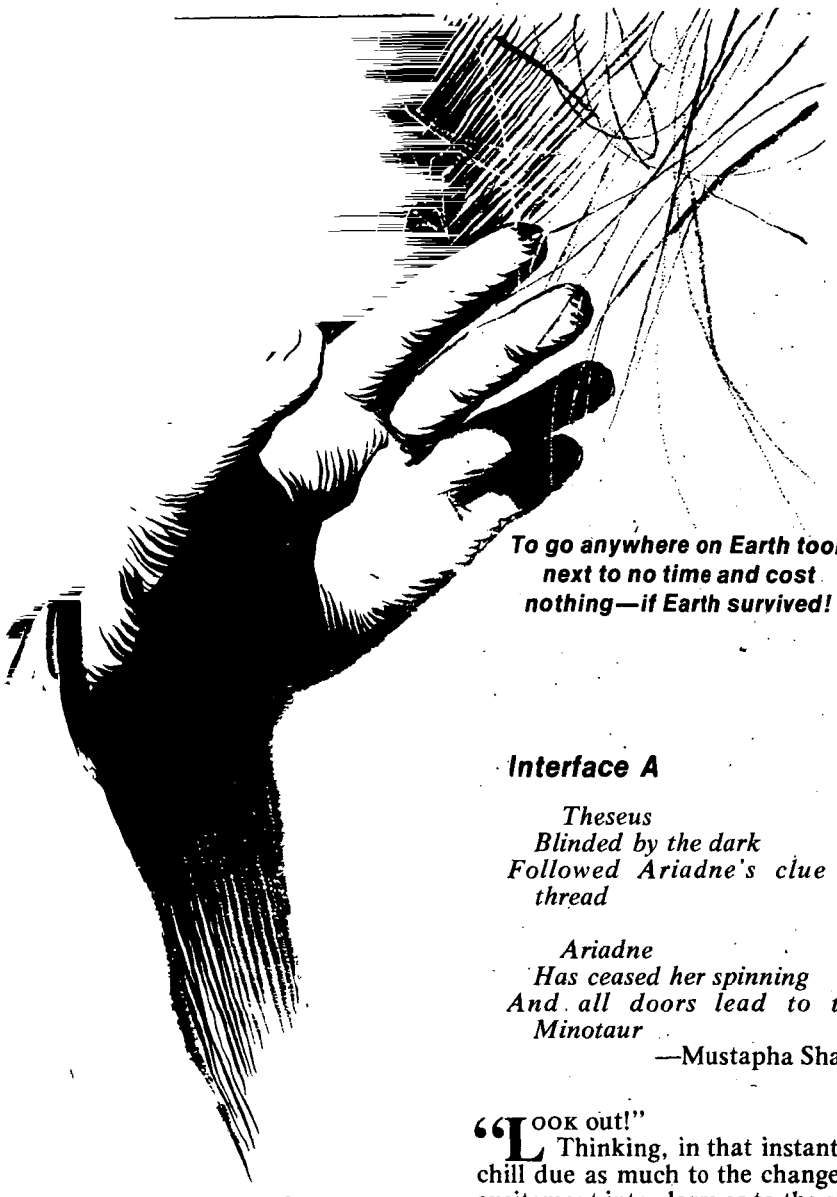

To go anywhere on Earth took next to no time and cost nothing—if Earth survived!

Interface A

Theseus
Blinded by the dark
Followed Ariadne's clue of thread

Ariadne
Has ceased her spinning
And all doors lead to the Minotaur

—Mustapha Sharif

"LOOK out!"

Thinking, in that instant of chill due as much to the change of excitement into alarm as to the step he and the Arab had taken from subtropical to subarctic, how ab-

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surd it was for him to blurt those words to a blind man. But Mustapha was accustomed to his lack after—how long? Fifteen years, fifty? It was not something one inquired about.

The Arab complied, tensing into that strange state of total attention which, Hans Dykstra had sometimes imagined, could truly halt the passage of the blind one's personal time and poise him an arm's length away from the world experienced by ordinary people while he took exhaustive, unseeing stock of it.

That, too, made Hans shiver despite his climatized suit.

And then he realized—of course! Cobwebs!

He forced himself to take a deep breath and fear subsided as icy air seeped through his mask. There was no light here except from the powerful hand torch he had brought and the very first thing he had seen as he arrived had been gray fluff-thickened strands barring his exit from the skelter.

Illegal it might be, but one did hear stories now and then about people who couldn't afford a privateer and rigged mantraps of their own devising.

"I sense no one," Mustapha said in a voice not quite tinged with complaint. The eagerness that drove him had nothing in common with his companion's—at least none the latter could recognize. They were collaborators, but they were not and could not be partners. One might say, *The enemy of my enemy* . . . And be able to proceed no further with an explanation.

Hans uttered the necessary words and into the fringe of the lamp's beam instantly rose a brown hand, child-chubby as Mustapha's face, groping greedily for the spider's fragile legacy.

"Wait, wait—" Hans implored, thrusting away the blue flower, the speedwell, which of course he had held up before him when he had entered the skelter. He hastened through the regular protective charms in his mind, meantime using one hand to sweep the visible portion of the house with his lamp and keeping the other alert to punch a getaway code should someone turn out to be already in possession. Such caution was very likely superfluous—an assurance from Mustapha was worth a dozen instrument readings. But since neither the radiation counter nor the bio-assay unit had beeped, the place was obviously habitable, and it had been long since one stopped to ask polite questions of strangers who showed up unannounced in a domestic skelter.

"Why wait?" Mustapha demanded querulously. "Because you can see a warning sign?"

With a sigh Hans abandoned his mental formulae before completion. "No," was his gruff answer. "Because when you touch the webs you'll break them and I want to get them on film first."

He unslung his camera and flash to record the delicate tracery marred with thickening dust.

"Keep your hand out of the shot," he added, eye glued to the viewfinder. "Want to get yourself braced?"

"They will not find your pictures

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until they're meant to—after you're dead. So at least you originally promised me."

"I could be dead, but you could still be alive." Hans grunted and wound the film on. "Good, two will be enough. Go ahead."

PLUMP fingers moved in air with the slyness of some stalking creature, located a web strand, felt along it with the precision of a musician's tracing out a melody. Without breaking the strand they found another—broke both in a deliberate gesture and savored the sensation of contact. Hans had witnessed Mustapha performing similar marvels before, but this was the most amazing. To stroke the full length of that spider silk and leave it intact until the moment of his decision to snap it—such abilities sometimes made the Arab seem inhuman.

But there was no room in Dykstra's mind right now for reflection, only for reaction. This time—no doubt about it—Mustapha had done him proud. Hans had guessed from the form of the code he had bought that the find was exceptionally early and had dared to hope it might lie in the first million. On site, he was immediately ready to believe they had located one in the first hundred thousand, assuming that this was Scandinavia—and everything pointed to it. The air was certainly cold enough and facing him across the living zone were big windows, absolutely black, silent witnesses of a northern night.

"Oh, wow," he said under his breath. The phrase was archaic, but English was not his mother tongue and anyhow, if someone had invented a better way to express delighted astonishment he hadn't heard about it. Under the obliterating dust the floor looked like natural wood parquet. Draped with cobwebs, that might be an authentic Hille chair. Weren't those shelves System Cado?

"It pleases you?" Mustapha murmured, his study of the webs complete. At once he had reverted to his regular manner—cool, detached, as though he were a machine programed to acquire and analyze with maximum concentration all new data that presented themselves, to idle in the face of any precedented situation. This was the ninth time he and Hans had come together to a lost home. How his companion obtained the codes to reach them Hans had no idea and intended never to ask, for fear of being told that the two of them were relying on some ancient "little black book" rather than some burgled bank of computer records, or bribery of a technician at the Skelter Authority.

And the Arab went on, "I apologize for being overly eager to touch the webs. But they are so rare now. I had not felt one since boyhood. I had almost forgotten them. Curious! One would have expected spiders to be tough."

Yes, perhaps, Hans thought. But infection had come out of Central America—a fungus or some microscopic parasite—and something had kept happening to their eggs . . . Well, one would also at one time have imagined that hu-

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manity was tough.

Aloud he said, "I think this strike is the best yet."

Cozy in his suit, he drew down his mask and inhaled the harsh air with paradoxical enjoyment. It was cruel to the throat, but it tasted infinitely cleaner than what he had left minutes ago. That had been tainted with the sewer stench of the Mediterranean and the collective halitosis of Valletta. The dust merely added spice to its tang.

Unencumbered with equipment, Mustapha had walked forward out of range of the handlamp's beam to stand on the level floor and turn, as though on a slowly revolving potter's wheel, soaking in the nonvisual information the house could afford him. Once or twice he clapped loudly, cocking his head, mapping walls and doorways and furniture, sniffing the while, memorizing new scents.

More slowly and a little enviously (but to envy a man who had been blinded was crazy!) Hans also emerged from the skelter, hung about with safety devices, camera, flash-bar, bag of spare film, lamp, instruments. It was all gear legitimately come by, but there was nothing legitimate about the use to which he was at present putting it.

His profession was that of a recuperator—his duty was to share out reclaimed resources around the world to those who were in greatest need of them or who could exploit them for the general good. It wasn't the lure of strange places that had enticed him to take up his dangerous and unlawful hobby, for he was routinely instructed to go to every continent as and when a reclaimable cache was reported to the Economics Authority.

No, what fascinated him was the form and pattern of a dead age, in suspended animation now but being gnawed by time so rapidly that, unless someone made a record of it less tenuous than memory could provide, its relics would have to be reconstructed in ignorance by the archeologists of the far future.

If there were any.

The skelter here was indeed one of the very earliest, a half-century old and amazingly bulky, as big as a car. He understood that some car parts had in fact been adapted for the first skelters, just as Remington had included bits from sewing machines in its original typewriters. So old a model might be developing faults. The thing had delivered him and the Arab here safely, but would it send them away again? Worst of all—would it take Mustapha away (leaving first, as always, his own incomprehensible curiosity satisfied) and then maroon him—maroon Hans Dykstra?

For an instant he pictured himself trudging across the snowbound wastes of . . . What country was this anyhow? Sweden? Norway? Finland? Most likely Sweden—there was a Volvo plate on the skelter's crystal box, rimed with frost but legible. An almost vacant land, then. The winter population of Sweden was reputed to be down to around two, three thousand now, mostly eccentric recluses, so hunting on foot for help in getting home

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would be absurd. In the summer, of course, things were different. There might be a million temporary residents by July.

He contemplated the skelter gloomily. Like most people nowadays—or rather, like most privileged people—he could undertake simple routine maintenance on his own model of skelter—work equivalent to changing a car tire or a tap washer—but he had never seen a design this old before. If he were to start making inquiries about service manuals for obsolete Volvo skelters, though, within the day some bland official would track him down to ask what need he had for such data. And Hans had absolutely no desire to land a bracelet for code-breaking. No, he would have to put his faith in the high standard of Swedish craftsmanship, take his chances of being disintegrated on the way to or from home—or of being stuck here until summer gave him the chance to mingle with a mass of visitors at a public skelter outlet.

It wouldn't be impossible to survive here for a while. It might even be fun—in a way. Novel, at any rate. He had never experienced such solitude as this lonely northern land promised. He had walked all around the living zone by now—his heels on the hard parquet affording Mustapha the sonic reflections he needed to build his chiropteran picture of their surroundings—and located the kitchen. Apart from the packs of food in the freezer—which obviously he would not dare touch, since they had been thawed and refrozen countless times—there was a huge store of canned goods. And if that wall gauge was to be relied on—hadn't just jammed at a false reading—there were almost a thousand liters of oil in the heating tank.

On the other hand, Dany would report him missing at once and the authorities would promptly start turning the skelter system inside out in search of a fault that might have destroyed him in transit. There weren't so many human beings left you could afford to have them disappear at random—the days when, if they heard about them, most people regarded a million deaths with equanimity, a mere garnish to breakfast, were over. And the last thing Hans wanted was official notice attracted to himself. He would simply have to pray that the skelter would last out another dozen cycles.

By way of insurance he retrieved his speedwell and placed it inconspicuously in a corner of the machine. That was a safe token to leave—its name had made the pretty little blue flower the commonest of all life symbols to take with you on a journey.

Then, pushing such considerations to the back of his mind, he photographed the living zone, then the kitchen, then the sauna he discovered beyond, shooting to avoid the tracks he and Mustapha had left in the dust as clear as in new snow.

Next he came to a small study with an open bureau bearing a Halda typewriter, documents in pigeonholes, a pile of dusty correspondence paper, which he blew at

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gently until the name and address were legible. From it he learned that the house's owners had been called Eriksson, that he and Mustapha were indeed in Sweden—near a place called Umea which he would have to look up on a map when he got home—and something else which struck him as literally incredible.

The skelter code was printed on the letterhead!

Interface B

O my beloved, I offer you my heart
To eat as you would bite a pomegranate—
But beware.
A human heart holds seeds like a pomegranate
And some are sweet but more are poisonous—
We have seen much death, you and I.

—Mustapha Sharif

ALMOST he snatched up the entire pile, thinking to dump it on the big open hearth of the living zone and set light to it. He checked his hand an inch from the paper in the same moment he heard Mustapha's cool query: "Hans, is something wrong?"

"No—nothing," he answered with an effort. True enough. He had imagined something was, but the reaction stemmed from habit. Even if Mustapha were going to charge him twenty thousand for the code that was here repeated scores of times, he didn't need to fear the loss of his monopoly. Years had gone by without anyone's finding the way here—until now. Most likely as long again would pass before other feet smutched this floor. Those numbers were simply—numbers.

No, wait. They were something more, after all. A symbol—a key symbol—of that strange and far-off world of the recent past he was struggling to capture and preserve for posterity. A good clear picture of the paper, or better yet an actual sheet of it, would have to be included in his final report.

"You exclaimed," Mustapha said obstinately. "It must have been for a cause. You have found a clue to the fate of the former occupants?"

A shadow of ghoulish hunger lay on his words, familiar to Hans from their previous expeditions together. (How had they managed to become open with each other that first time? Hans had tried over and over to reconstruct the details in his memory. He was sure of only one fact, that Mustapha had been the one to broach their teaming up. Himself, he would not have dared. Nor, in a sense, had Mustapha "dared." He had determined that trips such as this could be safely undertaken. There had been someone before, another man—or possibly a woman—who had traveled with him to forgotten lonely homes and added those details necessary to comprehension of the whole that a visitor without sight could not provide for himself. But Mustapha had never spoken of the fate of Hans's predecessor.)

Curtly Hans explained now—his

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head buzzing with plans for later visits—the need for cleaning materials, floodlights, reference books about the culture of the country fifty years ago to explain the purpose of the mysterious gadgets such as he knew from experience he was bound to find, dictionaries to help him puzzle out a few of the letters and the shopping list he had seen scrawled on a memo board in the kitchen . . .

But when he came back he would come alone. For the moment he owed Mustapha something more than the mere money that would by then have changed hands—in return, of course, for another volume of the Arab's poetry, hand-illuminated and magnificently calligraphed but to Hans totally incomprehensible. Hans understood no Arabic, but the frequent purchases he made from Mustapha to cover up the transfer of the large sums he shelled out for illegal skelter codes excited no remark. Little new beauty was being brought into the modern world and what there was—was precious. A score of other people patronized Mustapha even more generously and without ulterior motive.

Even Dany, who was resentful of the money her husband chose not to spend on her, had been impressed enough by the delicately illustrated books, lively with red and blue and real gold-leaf, to believe that he was buying them as a safe investment for their old age.

MUSTAPHA was talking. Hans compelled/composed himself to hear the words.

Ballantine Books

1974 may well be remembered as the year of Alan Dean Foster, or so it is beginning to seem here at Ballantine where we have three of his books scheduled within five months. Not bad for a young writer whose very first book was published as recently as 1972. Just off the press is LUANA, Alan's adaptation of the jungle extravaganza now playing in movie theaters around and about the country. Luana, something of a female Tarzan, and her family—a lion, a tiger, and a chimp—are vividly brought to life on the cover by the inimitable Frazetta. Watch for LUANA; she's a gal you're not likely to forget!

Alan's other books already scheduled include: ICERIGGER, a March sf adventure in which he returns to the marvelously imaginative galaxy of his first novel THE TAR-AIYM k RANG; and in June STAR TREK LOG ONE, first book in a series based on the successful new animated Star Trek series. But much more about those two as they are published.

For his next project Alan has suggested scripting "Deep Thoat"—an X-rated Barsoom adventure. Hmmm . . .

● ● ●

So much for a look into our future. Now back to the real world and more February books. ". . . a stunning debut by a new science fiction talent." That's what *Publishers Weekly* says about WALK TO THE

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END OF THE WORLD, by Suzy McKee Charnas. This unusually powerful first novel will surely be a contender—we think—when awards are voted. "Not only are the prose, atmosphere, and credibility of the post-holocaust story superior," *PW* continues, "but [the book] boldly advances into the convoluted area of sex, a place where most sf writers are either timid or puerile." Who could ask for a better review? And, good news, Charnas has a sequel in the typewriter!

● ● ●

Back to the top of our sf list is NERVES, Lester del Rey's now-classic tale of disaster in an atomic plant. First written in 1942, this story of a nuclear reaction bursting out of control is even more devastating today. What starts out as an ordinary experiment on an ordinary day turns into a race to prevent atomic holocaust. As fuel supplies evaporate everywhere and we begin to look more to atomic power for our energy, we come closer and closer to the world del Rey wrote about. Now in its fourth big printing, NERVES is still a must for every sf reader. "A wholly admirable blend of prophetic thinking, warm human values and powerful narrative suspense," said the *New York Herald Tribune* reviewer. Need we say more?

● ● ●

LUANA, WALK TO THE END OF THE WORLD and NERVES—each $1.25—are at your bookstore or newsstand now. If you can't find them complain to the dealer and/or send $1.25 per book, plus 25c per order for handling, to Ballantine Cash Sales, PO Box 505, Westminster, Maryland 21157.

"There is a little smell of death, but it is so faint it is more likely to issue, I think, from food that has rotted through several summers and been frozen again. Those documents—they tell us where we are. Do they also hint at what became of the people who lived here?"

Forgetful, Hans shook his head. Mustapha was looking at him directly and his eyes were bright in the lamp's beam. It was not the eyes that were at fault but the nerves that served them. At first Hans had suspected that the poet had been lying about being blind.

Recovering almost at once, he said, "No, but we can dismiss fallout, I think. This area must have been well out of range of the big blasts at Kiruna and Trondjhem."

Reflexively he confirmed his statement with a glance at his radiation counter, even though it had remained silent. At most places he went to in the line of duty it beeped incessantly and he had to sort through weathered industrial junk, hampered as much by the distracting noise as by his lead-impregnated suit.

"One would have expected that, yes," Mustapha murmured. "Disease, possibly? So many epidemics were imported here by the skelter. There are other rooms. For the sake of your 'after' pictures, Hans, you go into them first."

With an ironical little bow.

Sourly Hans complied, mentally agreeing with the other's guesswork. Sickness after killing sickness had exploded like shrapnel from the few surviving reservoirs in less fortunate areas of the world

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into those whose inhabitants had neglected immunization procedures as needless. Which one—of the many that had come this way—had carried off the Erikssons? Plague? Diphtheria? Cholera? Rabies? Smallpox?

No, none of these. Violence.

In the small room adjacent to the study a child's skeleton lay in bed. The coverlet had been soaked with blood, urine and excrement and finally with the liquid foulness of rotting flesh. It had dried into a hard loathsome lump.

"Ah," Mustapha said with the air of a man whose favorite suspicion has been confirmed. "I take it we have stumbled on an actual body?"

Hans swallowed against nausea, though it was far from the first time he had chanced across similar horrors. He lowered the camera with which he had been ready to take one of what Mustapha scathingly referred to as his "after" pictures. Customarily what he did at each of these lost homes was, as it were, reverse the effects of time. He recorded on his arrival the state into which the passage of years had reduced the place—then, with much care and labor, he would restore it to something resembling what it must have looked like when it had been in regular occupation.

But a scene like this? No, he didn't want it included in his report.

Now, with that incredible depersonalized interest Hans at first had privately termed callousness but now knew to be something his vocabulary furnished no name for, Mustapha slipped past him, located the bed, ran his hands lightly over the disgusting mass until they discovered the skull.

"A child," he said. "Boy? Girl?"

Hans surveyed the room, torch beam dancing wildly on the irregular surfaces of a table, a closet, a shelf of toys and books with brightly colored pictures. On a chairback, casually deposited, two pathetic scraps of cloth, the parts of a bikini.

"Girl."

"And young, by the size. Ten? Twelve?"

"More likely ten. As far as I can guess from the toys and books without disturbing them."

He thought in passing: funny, one had the impression that Swedes were casual about their bodies, that a child so young would be let run naked. But perhaps, like so many other preconceptions, it was a trick of perspective. Around the Mediterranean what had been believed about Swedes in the old days—fifty years ago—would logically have been based on the atypical behavior of expatriates.

A hall of distorting mirrors. The whole Earth had been turned into one—and sometimes the distortions had been accepted for reality. It was going to be an infinitely long, infinitely painful task to set the consequences right.

"Perhaps in the adjacent room, then," Mustapha said, "we shall find traces of her parents. Lead the way again, if you please."

There, in the master bedroom,

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were two more skeletons, one sitting up in a twin bed, the other sprawled on the floor nearby, adherent to the ruin of an Iceland-pony rug. Among the shreds of dried ancient meat clinging to the ribs it could be seen that the latter's breastbone and one shoulderblade had been shattered. Also, on the wall backing the scene, there was a pit such as might be made by a deformed and tumbling bullet.

Taking Hans's arm in a light grip, not to be tightened—his fingers were dreadfully strong—unless his companion tried to shake it off, Mustapha demanded a description in vivid detail before crossing the threshold and at once began to compile an explanation.

"Ah, it comes clear. They were too casual with their skelter code, because in those days possession of a skelter was something to boast about. One midnight they were awakened by the arrival signal and the intruder proved to be a thief—"

"Not a thief," Hans cut in, dully pleased at being able to make the contradiction. "A thief would have ransacked the house for money and valuables, left drawers and closets open everywhere. There's no more disorder than you'd expect in a lived-in home with a child around."

"Someone who didn't come here to steal, then," Mustapha accepted, unperturbed. "But who wanted his presence kept secret even at the cost of three lives. A spy or saboteur—even a whole gang of saboteurs."

"People playing skelter roulette?" Hans offered, hoping for a second chance to edit his companion's intuitive analysis.

"No, that's too recent a phenomenon. By the time that fad caught on the family living here would have scrapped the notepaper with the code on it—perhaps, if they were rich enough, installed a privateer, because it was about then that privateers started to come on the market. But I gathered that the skelter is an extremely old model?"

"Yes."

"Very well, I believe in my saboteurs. Memory reports some kind of industry at Umea—it was a city of moderate importance, a convincing target."

He stood silent for a long moment, inhaling through flared nostrils, then unexpectedly turned on his heel. Hans asked, unconsciously rubbing the spot on his arm where those deceitfully gentle fingers had rested, "You're leaving already?"

"Yes. Thank you for your assistance. I have what I came for. I wish you success in garnering what you came for, too."

"When—when shall I see you again?"

"When I have something else to offer that's just as good." With an enigmatic smile. "Which may not be soon, but then—this site should occupy you for quite a while, no? So I shan't hurry. Well, goodbye, and thanks again."

There was a question Hans always wanted to ask at this moment of separation—was he Mustapha's sole customer for illegal codes? Now, once again, it trembled on his lips but remained unuttered. There was a faint wash of blue light from the skelter. He was alone.

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ALMOST at once other thoughts were chased from Hans's mind by a surge of relief at his being able to get ahead so quickly with his main task. The more he studied the house the more convinced he became that, restored to its pristine condition, it was going to be the star of his secret collection of words and pictures which—as Mustapha had reminded him—no one else must learn of until after his death.

Then generations yet unborn would bless his foresight and dedication to the cause of history. If news of what he was doing leaked out while he was still alive, though, he would undoubtedly be braced, no matter how high his motives. There were few absolutes left on Earth. The right to conceal a private skelter code had to be among them.

Well, he could now stop theorizing about the Erikssons' fate and get rid of their remains. Not too soon, either. Nearly two-thirds of the population of the planet had been killed by violence or disease within twenty years of the marketing of the first skelters and, as though they felt chilly in the shadow of that tidal wave of death, men now were paranoid about the presence of corpses.

Hans was not immune.

Luckily—in the course of his regular work—he had gained access to garbage-disposal codes that ensured delivery straight to the hot heart of a furnace. Presumably such codes had not existed when the Erikssons were killed, or the intruder would have bundled up the bodies along with the blood-stained

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bedding and rugs, made the beds afresh and left the house looking as though the owners had dropped down to the tropics for a few days and might return at any moment. Exactly as Hans planned to do now.

He felt fortunate that he didn't have to buy his garbage codes. They came expensive. They had to. They made it so easy to destroy the evidence of crime, especially murder.

He decided to attend to the chore right now instead of delaying it until his next visit. Used though he was to entering long-abandoned premises legitimately in the course of his profession—though never private homes, only factories and warehouses—and finding not two or three bodies but great piles of them, sometimes charred a little by pyres the earlier survivors had been too weak to keep burning, Hans found he hated the idea of coming back to this house that once must have been very beautiful and finding corpses in residence. They would make him feel like a trespasser.

He didn't bother to rehearse any prayers as he consigned the bodies to the skelter. In Northern Europe these people would presumably have been either atheist—in which case they wouldn't have cared—or Christian. As a moderately devout follower of the Way of Life Hans regarded Christianity with the same revulsion he felt for black magic.

Let their evil lord claim his own.

WHEN the distasteful task was over he relaxed and spent a long while roaming from room to room of the house, everywhere finding new objects to photograph, carefully pick up and marvel at. This family, probably not exceptionally prosperous, had been able to buy and use objects that today would fetch a small fortune in the antiques market. He found a camera better and more costly than his own, a range of long-playing records in a sealed cabinet with a glass door. Any of these items would attract bids from a hundred eager buyers. He discovered clothing of virtually imperishable synthetic fiber from which the dust fell away to reveal the brilliance of unfaded dyes as he lifted it. And more and still more whichever way he turned . . .

Abruptly he realized that his fingers and toes were growing numb despite his climatized garb. And his throat was stiffening, sure sign of incipient frost-dehydration. There was, he remembered, a thermometer apparently in working order on the wall of the kitchen. When he consulted it he discovered with alarm that he had been blithely wandering around at minus twenty Celsius.

Time for home. When he came back he must bring a heater.

Interface C

This I am compelled to utter in another tongue
But it is a truth important enough to be spoken:
Some of those who call a journey-map a "route"
Pronounce it "root" and cannot

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tell the two apart.
Others say "rout" which means
"to put to flight"
And oddly also "to pull up by
the roots . . ."
It is as though the genius of their
language
Gave them warning in advance,
which they ignored.
—Mustapha Sharif

TO POSSESS two private skelters was not unheard-of. To own three was remarkable, but certain successful persons, mostly working for the planetary authorities, had attained that goal and shuttled back and forth between three homes.

To own three sited all in the same building, even though the building was large and sprawled into many shady colonnades, white-glittering domes, towers of marble and courts where lizards darted at the feet of priceless statues—that was unique. And their equally unique proprietor was the man who, some declared, was the greatest living poet: Mustapha Sharif.

But if someone said as much in his hearing he would wryly observe that there was very little competition nowadays.

Possession of his third skelter—high in a minaret where five times daily an elderly and arthritic muezzin came to call to prayer, those of the local people who had not been seduced into following the infidel creed, the Way of Life—was not an achievement he advertised. The world might assume the existence of the first skelter—so famous a man was bound to have one at least. The lucky ones might even, by invitation, pass the privateer that guarded it and lavish on their host praise for the splendor of his home, which he could not see but always modestly said was worth maintaining for the pleasure it gave to others.

Equally, having arrived whether by skelter, on foot or by camelback, anybody might guess at a second skelter. The estate was on rocky, ill-favored ground, long unclaimed, but a skelter could and did bring in sweet water, delicate foods, relics salvaged from elsewhere on the planet.

But the third . . . Only two out of Mustapha's many servants were even aware that it was located behind that locked door on the last-but-one landing of a twisted staircase made of drab, worn tiles.

THERE was no light in the room. A current of warm air flowed from a high-set ventilator. Mustapha Sharif emerged from the skelter, swiftly and deftly exchanged his climatized suit—necessary for the visit to Sweden—for his usual burnoose and sandals. After listening carefully for the sound of footsteps he unlocked the door, stepped out, relocked the room. The heat of Africa brushed him like fine wires, making his chill skin tingle.

On the point of starting down the staircase he changed his mind and, instead, took the last short flight up to the rooftop. He needed time to digest what he had learned.

A stool had been set out near the parapet. He felt for it, positioned it where he could lean comfortably

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forward and faced the direction of ancient Luxor, which—so he had been told—was in line of sight from this tower. But he had scarcely begun to learn to think in pictures before he lost his simulated vision. Instead he thought in terms of his other senses. The hot dry air bore him sounds he readily identified, aromas that he knew as intimately as he knew his own hunger, thirst, fatigue. He sorted out the scents—dates, camel dung, humanity, cookfires, growing crops, spices, wet cloth tentered on poles to bleach and several other indistinguishable aromas in the air today. The odors of life, not of death.

There was going to be another poem. He could feel the shy probing of its first tendrils at the back of his mind, those tender early shoots that eventually would knot and crack flagstones into fragments.

He toyed with a phrase or two. The images were elusive. It was too soon. But the time would come.

Content to wait, preferring not to wonder whether eventually someone might read and understand his work rather than simply admire it and draw a correct conclusion about his inspiration, he turned his mind to another matter: Hans Dykstra.

He had made a mistake in choosing that man to go with him to the nine lost homes. There had better not be a tenth.

In the beginning it had seemed that Hans would be an ideal companion. There were others who might have been equally eager to buy illegal disused codes, but they were greedy, as had been his former partner—whom he had been compelled to lose, regretfully but with small compunction, when the man had started to pilfer rare and valuable items in such quantities that the authorities had grown suspicious and had clamped down. He was buried now and conferring what had been the life of his body to a field of corn.

To come upon somebody who wanted to leave, as a personal bequest to the whole of mankind, a series of documented samples of the past, one typical family home from each major culture of the preskelter period—but was content to store up his reports until he was safely dead—yes, that had seemed like a tremendous stroke of luck.

But Mustapha was wise to the ways in which a man could change. He knew beyond any possible doubt, that the idea of being famous in his lifetime had begun to erode Hans's original determination as surely as a river erodes the lip of a waterfall.

Sooner or later he would make a mistake. Sooner or later he would be tempted beyond endurance. He would carry home with him some precious object—more likely to be a tool, perhaps a camera, than a mere ornament—and it would be recognized by someone aware that Hans Dykstra was not entitled to possess it. A great deal was legitimately left from the heyday of mankind's inventiveness, but not so much that it was impossible to figure out illegal possessions.

And when Hans Dykstra's day of temptation came there would be

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trouble. Dreadful trouble. Therefore the day had better not arrive at all.

More content after having reached that decision, Mustapha relaxed into pure enjoyment of the sounds and scents that the breeze bore to him. He was glad he had chosen to settle in Middle Egypt. It was a place of strong and vivid stimuli. Its winds were alive with grit from the deserts. Its sunshine was harsh and its night air cold. Its water was flavored with the essence of inner Africa. And many, many of its rocks were chased with inscriptions left by long-dead hands.

It was about time he went back to the Luxor ruins and refreshed his fingertip acquaintance with the statues and the stelae.

Establishing himself here had not been easy. There was much history in the area, both ancient and modern, with a great gap in between the two. First, a community had flourished and faded in Pharaonic times. Next nothing much had happened—the life of the small village had repeated and repeated itself across the land. And then men built the Aswan High Dam—not the first, which did little damage, but the second and newer dam—and stole the annual floods from the peasants lower down and rendered millions of hectares downriver infertile, sterile, useless. Entire starving villages of people had trudged south to seek a new home—and an exhausted few had given up the journey here, where it was possible to raise subsistence crops and pasture a herd of goats.

Later, when Cairo and Alexandria were bombed, the Aswan High Dam was destroyed. Another horde of refugees, this time much larger, straggled along the banks of Father Nile and found that this was as far as they needed to travel in search of regular floods and revitalizing deposits of silt. In a year a new town grew here—too big for a village, built of too many shabby hovels to be called a city.

At first the locals were jealous of their well-watered land and declined to offer welcome to strangers. But the natives were slowly growing more tolerant. Indeed, they were becoming proud that their neighbor in the handsome mansion, though not Egyptian by birth, was admired the world around, was generous to the poor, gave work to the deserving and altogether behaved in a manner befitting those enjoying Allah's favor—bar one thing. He had truck with that instrument of Shaitan, the skelter. Even the most ignorant mud-grubbing *fellahin* were aware that the impiety of this invention had caused divine wrath to descend upon the world.

Even these reservations were being tempered by time. And by Mustapha Sharif's judicious donations of good seed, new strong baby camels, donkeys and useful tools. All these could be cleansed of the smirch the skelter had left on them and put to honest use. Slowly he was winning over his people. Now many hundreds of the younger people came and sat in his courts when he held open house on a feast day and invited the local imams to

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preside at a night-long recitation of the Blessed Koran.

A FOOTSTEP on the stairs. Thinking he had mused so long it was time for the muezzin to utter a prayer call, he roused and turned.

But those soft slippers did not belong to the muezzin. Here came Ali, his most trusted body-servant.

"What is it?" he demanded.

He heard shushing sounds—Ali was bowing.

"It is to be hoped that the work will not suffer," he said in a tone of regret. "One attends below, however, who wishes with urgency to speak with you. His name is Dr. Frederick Satamori."

Mustapha's heart lurched halfway to his soles. The Deputy Director of the Skelter Authority. What could have brought him here in person?

Myriad fearful images chased one another across his mind—memories of all the houses he had visited illegally, of all the codes he had sold first to his former partner, then to Hans Dykstra, who was so unconvincing in his role as a collector of finely calligraphed books of Arabic poetry . . .

He gathered himself with an effort. "Request Dr. Satamori to make himself comfortable in the Room of the Leopards," he directed. "Bring him refreshments. Inform him that I shall join him in a few minutes."

"The effendi's will is done," Ali said, backing away, his sandals scraping the sand-dusted floor.

But it was more than a few minutes before Mustapha regained his normal composure and was able to find his way down the twisted staircase.

Interface D

Time was when any lover, seeing
his mistress
Was gone from the room, might
call for her
And be assured that she
would hear his cry.

O my beloved, I do not treat you
coldly.
Rather am I haunted by the
knowledge
That one step may have put
the world between us.

—Mustapha Sharif

HANS wondered absently—what had the woman of that house been like? Tall, from her skeleton propped up in bed—devoid of a visible wound like her husband's but maybe she had been shot or stabbed in the throat or belly—but beautiful? Blonde? Blue-eyed?

No doubt there would be pictures of her in an album or a drawer, and of her husband and child, even though none had been on display.

She must at all events have been better than that lazy greedy incompetent smug ungrateful . . .

Resentful thoughts in his resentful brain, he stepped out of the skelter into his own hallway—and saw Dany rising from a chair to confront him.

He stopped, petrified. She had no business to be at home. She had told him she was off to a treasure hunt, a favorite pastime in the

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circles she frequented. He had relied on her solving the imbecilic clues, finding her way to the right place, staying at least several hours in the company of her friends.

Hers, Not his.

But here she was—and here he was, with the mask he had put on after her departure still around his neck, frost on the outlet vent of his suit, a score of fatal clues in plain sight for anyone to weave a noose for him.

Or worse—a bracelet, symbol of living death.

"Hans, where the hell have you been? I want your help."

Words flared instantly into his consciousness: *Liar. When you accept help the millennium will have arrived. I've told you over and over that you need it and Karl Bonetti would supply it and—the hell with you. May your next bug be fatal . . .*

But he couldn't say them. He was hung up by his conscience, a contra-survival thing inasmuch as it made him vulnerable, but one enjoined on him by the faith he had adopted, the Way of Life. Besides, to have an actual wife, legally bound—no matter that she was aging, fat, plain, querulous and selfish—was a great status symbol. Young subordinates came to him during brief breaks from the job in Caracas or Calcutta or Cardiff to pose him problems about their sex lives and ask his experienced opinion. Thanks to a contagious puerperal fever, CPF, men outnumbered women five to three and the disease was still rife. Until sufficient vaccine to treat half a billion people all at once could be deployed the pattern would remain constant—any female who was even passably attractive could and generally would ignore marriage. She would stay free to trade in one man for another for any advantage she might gain.

Hans fought for a grip on his thoughts. Dany was stupid and might not put two and two together from his outfit—she had often seen him come home similarly clad from a day's work. He said peaceably, invoking the authorized hobby he had adopted as a cover for his real pastime, "I've been out shooting photographs as usual. What's the trouble and what can I do?"

And looked at her for once, instead of merely registering her presence.

THE sight was remarkable. She had on a pathetically glamorous new outfit, obviously expensive, hand-embroidered with huge flowers. He saw Shapex leotards, a Shapex bolero, wrinkled skin between, a tropical or sub-tropical style more extreme than was common around the Mediterranean in winter. The whole was tipped with hood, boots and gauntlets lined with fur (genuine, as he well knew because his team had found the skins during a survey he had lately mounted in Saskatchewan) and framed with an all-zones climatized coat, currently wide open as though she were too desperate for time to take it off even in the temperate air of Malta. Not only her face, but her legs, bare midriff and presumably arms had been plastered with inex-

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pert makeup—she jangled with jewelry and stank of far too much perfume. But as long as she was content with her appearance .....

"I've been invited to a party at Chaim Aleuker's," she almost screamed, holding up a slip of card. "But I can't figure out the clue in the invitation—"

Hans stared in disbelief. Invited to a party by Chaim Aleuker? This—this *wreck?* Aleuker was probably the richest man alive, thanks to having invented the privateer, the code-shifting device that had changed the skelter from a wild beast to a domesticated draft animal, as it were. Millions of people who had never met him reacted to his name as to an electric shock—and Hans did so now.

For an instant he wondered whether he could be wrong about Dany—making ill-founded judgments. After six years of marriage he was sharing little of his daily life with her. Perhaps she did possess some outstanding quality. Perhaps the fact of her having stayed married to him had singled her out or some other aspect of her personality had—

But she was already disillusioning him.

"Don't look at me like that," she snapped. "It's perfectly true about the invitation. Apparently Aleuker is bored with the people he knows and wants to meet some new ones, so he's sent out cards like this all over the world. Molly Chu got one as well, but the bitch won't join forces to work out what it means."

"You should consult the library computer," Hans suggested, his tone still level and polite.

"Do you think I'm an idiot? Would I have asked you if the computer had been any help, you—you pompous clod?"

Alarm signal. Next she would be raking up his past, about which he was five years too old not to feel embarrassed even if living with Giuseppe and Hakim had been *faute de mieux.* His quarrels with Dany always followed an identical pattern because they had not grown up in the atmosphere of tolerance displayed by the post-Blowup generation.

It must be great, he often felt, to have come to terms with reality, instead of laboring under the delusive burden of a vanished world, leaden with prejudices and preconceptions. He did do his best—struggled to accept the doctrines of the Way of Life and act on them. Perhaps if he had managed to find a younger wife?

No, that was out of the question. Possibly he ought to have resigned himself to bachelorhood, especially since his marriage was compulsorily childless.

YOUNGER people had no memory of ancient evils like churches and nation-states. But they were all too keenly aware of their legacy.

Their frontiers nullified by the skelter, under constant attack by saboteurs and partisans who could be half a world away before their time bombs exploded, five of the Great Powers had gone into insensate nuclear spasms, as though they had taken strychnine. The survivors, or at least some of them, be-

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lieved their governments had also been responsible for the subsequent epidemics. Given that foundation to build on, they had abandoned at last everything their ancestors had taken pride in—patriotism, religion, conformist morality, group solidarity . . . Oh, not completely, not all at once. But for the third and final time the wisdom-chain had been shattered—so ran the teachings of the Way of Life.

In the beginning, the argument declared, to be older had meant to be wiser—to have had more experience of how things are, to be more in touch with the realities of human existence.

Then had come a war that had murdered a whole generation of fine young men in mud and blood and murmurings of dissent had accompanied them to their unmarked graves.

The saying had been: *We have fought the War to End War.* Many had believed and been comforted.

In one more generation had come another war, one that killed not only young men but old people and little children in their beds, that loosed the firepower of the universe on the fragile flesh of man.

By that time young people had begun saying in tones of extreme puzzlement, *Grandfather promised peace to father and father swore he would preserve it and father is dead in an ugly, cruel manner. Can we trust nobody at all?*

And then had come the third war, the Blowup, and the wisdom-chain—already filed twice at its crucial link—snapped.

It was a new world. But a new world that must understand the old in order to surpass it. Hans Dykstra was convinced of that.

RIGHT now there was no time for reflection, though. He needed some means to placate his wife. Being too slow, he failed. This was unusual. Ordinarily he was quick to react and forestall her—he had to be, because the risk of her leaving him was so high. No matter that she was close to fifty—no matter that under the thick powder dark bags marred her eyes and her cheeks were crested with blue-red broken veins—no matter that her bust, her belly and her bottom sagged—she was *a wife.* And for a young man nowadays no achievement surpassed stealing away a wife. Legal bonds notwithstanding, Hans could lose her.

Yet this time he was laggard. Dany made it as far as sobs and wails.

She was eighteen years older than he. Like many of her generation—of both sexes—she was subject to crying fits born of sheer despair at the disappearance of the world she had been taught to believe in as a child. Perhaps earlier than most she had learned to exploit tears as a weapon against anybody who worried about her, who cared whether or not she killed herself in accordance with her frequent threats. It was there, Hans suspected, that one should seek the reason for her not accepting the invitation she had been granted by Karl Bonetti.

Karl was a psychiatrist who practiced on the neighboring island of

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Gozo. Islands were popular among those who were lucky enough to enjoy access to the skelter system—they were instant geographical symbols of freedom from the limits of separative space. This condition of depressive nostalgia being so common, Karl had literally hundreds of patients on supportive therapy because he couldn't cope individually with them. But Hans had located a drug Karl desperately wanted dug out of the scrap-pile of Europe and, out of gratitude, he had offered to add Dany to his list.

One of these days Hans was going to insist. But not today. Right now he wanted her safely out of the way so that he could get to his darkroom and see how the pictures of the Swedish house had come out.

"LET me look," he finally cajoled and she switched off the sobs. She gave him the card, wearing, he thought, the hopeful expression of a slum child promised a day in the country. He selected the image with conscious pride from the stock of data about the near past he carried in his head. In the old days it had been said that the period of history about which people knew least was the one directly before they were born—too recent to be taught from a book, too vivid still for the elders to offer an objective appraisal. He had resolved not to let the saying be true in his own case.

The card bore a short enigmatic verse, akin to a crossword puzzle clue. That much he had expected. He had not foreseen that—if this did indeed emanate from Chaim Aleuker—it would be so childishly simple.

He read aloud, without stressing the rhythm, "'I'll give to you some exercise and syllogisms from the wise. Madam will you talk, madam will you walk and talk with me?'"

"It's—it's sort of like poetry, I think," Dany ventured. "The library computer says it goes to an old English tune called *The Keys of Canterbury.*"

"So I suppose Canterbury was the first place you made for?" he countered—more scathingly than he had intended. The last thing he wanted was for her to lose her temper so completely she would decide to stay home for the pleasure of spoiling his own leisure time.

She colored, although one would have imagined her too old to blush, and miraculously replied in a mutter instead of a scream.

"I couldn't—not the original Canterbury anyway. They dropped so many bombs on eastern England. But there's another Canterbury in New Zealand, so I went there, but there wasn't anyone to give me the second card and—"

"Oh, honestly!" He handed back the card. "What about Athens—the Lyceum? Aristotle founded a school of philosophy there. They called it the Peripatetic School—the walking-around school—because of his habit of strolling along while he was lecturing."

"Are you sure?" she asked doubtfully.

"Ah—no. I'm not even sure the Lyceum still exists even as a ruin. But I think it may—Athens was among the few capital cities that

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didn't get blasted, wasn't it? Look, you check out the idea. If it doesn't fit come back and see if I've thought of an alternative."

He had been ready to cap his contribution to her day's amusement with a kiss, but his tentative gesture went to waste. She snatched back the card and headed for the skelter at a run, tossing over her shoulder a word of thanks that was literally cut in half as the transmission effect displaced her.

Typical.

But at least she had left him in peace. For that small mercy he made perfunctory obeisance to the nearest life symbol—here in the hallway they kept a tortoise, because Dany refused to be content with a mere plant in sight of the spot where invited guests gained their first impression of the Dykstra residence—before shutting his darkroom door.

Interface E

Father!
You desired me to do you honor
As a dutiful and loving son.
Father!
I am indeed obliged to you because
It was you who facilitated my existence.
Father!
You must not imagine that I'm disrespectful
But the best way I can conceive to honor you,
Father,
Is to think otherwise and make different mistakes.

—Mustapha Sharif

DR. FREDERICK SATAMORI hailed, of course, not from mainland Japan but from Okinawa (again, the association with the concept "island").

And he met Mustapha in the Room of the Leopards—leopards the owner of the house had never seen, could scarcely imagine, for they existed in paint on the walls and had been varnished over so that not even the minuscule discontinuity between one color and another revealed the fine detail of the design to Mustapha's probing fingers.

Yet imagination populated the room with watchful threat—the alert tension belonging to beasts that must scent, spot, run down and overcome their prey. Sighted or blind, Mustapha who had early grown acquainted with the reality of such abstracts as "hunger" well understood the concepts "quest" and "quarry". To come in here was to taste blood in anticipation.

Yet he had no grudge against Satamori. He might have picked the Room of Elephants, or of Fishes, or of Flowers . . . .

Never mind—his choice of meeting place had been dictated by instinct. And now they were both here and both tea and coffee had been made available—the scents mingled—and Satamori had come freshly from a place that flavored his presence with jasmine, lavender and the smoke of some resinous tree being burned on an open fire.

He rose and clasped his host's proffered hand and spoke formal greetings that conveyed less information than the sweat of his palm.

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This man, Mustapha thought, *is frightened. So am I. But he, having eyes, is less likely to be aware of my fear. Good.*

Relaxing, he sat down and inquired, "Fred, why bother to come calling in person when there was a risk of my discourteously making you wait? You should have phoned."

"There are times;" Satamori said dryly, "when waiting for a call to be put through makes one more impatient than waiting to be let past a privateer. Today is—"

"My servants made you wait in the skelter?" Mustapha interrupted in horror.

"No, no—they were the soul of courtesy. Indeed it was not my idea to disturb you, but Ali's. I was merely happy to break my journey."

"Journey?"

"Yes. I have to go around the world today, to its other side. Switching from dawn to evening is no longer easy for me. I'm old."

"That isn't true," Mustapha said.

"You are kind, but I'm afraid it is. I'm still under sixty, but the strain is beginning to make me understand what old age is." Satamori sighed loudly and took a sip of his coffee. He added after a pause. "Too many of us are old."

Mustapha waited.

"Anyway," the visitor resumed, "I felt I could take the risk of interrupting your contemplation and would have been quite content to wait for an hour or two without disturbing you, thinking we might go on together to Chaim's party. But Ali felt he should announce me."

"What party?"

Satamori almost dropped his cup. "But—but surely of all people you must have been—"

His voice trailed away.

"I begin to comprehend," Mustapha said. "Are you referring by any chance to a treasure hunt?"

"What else?"

"I see," Mustapha murmured and relished the conscious irony of the phrase. "You too believe that by sprinkling the planet with clues that may come to the attention of random people—and require a moderately advanced IQ to unravel—we can find the next generation of managers and administrators for Earth."

"I can't conceive of a better way," Satamori granted. "I should not have mentioned the matter, though. I'm sorry. I simply was not aware that you were opposed to it."

Mustapha leaned back, stretching cramped limbs. He said, "It is not I who am opposed. The opposition comes from something deeper—the force that evolved us."

Brief blank silence. Satamori said eventually, "You are adherent to the Way of Life? One had assumed that you must be—"

"Moslem because I chose to live in Egypt?" Mustapha cut in. "Not at all—I am a skeptic. But I picked on Egypt because it was here that the cycle of the seasons, the rise and fall of the Nile, taught men to create absolutes—strict measures of distance, area and elapsed time. I often think of death. When I do I feel certain I would rather die in the faith of the modern upstarts than in the faith of my ancestors. Has that

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notion never crossed your mind? Forgive me—this is not something one asks a friend. Being blind occasionally makes me tactless."

"You—" One could hear Satamori having to moisten his lips. "You hold Moslem ceremonies here at your home."

"Indeed, indeed. But as to the Koran—well, without wishing to appear arrogant, I could have compiled a more convincing book of divine revelation myself. The same goes for the Christian Bible and the Little Red Book as well." Mustapha laughed to diminish the weight of his words.

"And you could also, no doubt, have edited the doctrines of the Way of Life?" Satamori snapped.

"My dear friend, I did."

THE silence was strangled. At long last Satamori forced out: "If this is another of your subtle jokes you must pardon a foreigner for not—"

"Ah, I am doing what I always do without being able to help myself!" Mustapha cried. "When I'm interrupted during the composition of a poem—no, don't blame yourself, I was making very poor headway and the result will be all the better for being punctuated by a night's sleep—but when I am interrupted I tend to grow snappish. I've given offense without intention. Let me hear that I've apologized to your satisfaction!"

"No offense was taken," Satamori muttered.

"Ah, I'm glad. But I did provoke you into suspecting me of a somewhat silly joke, did I not? I should erase that notion, too. I meant what I said literally. I did edit many of the sayings of Prince Knud—from an English version admittedly, not the original Swedish—and if there is any form, shape, structure to the texts—well, I imposed it."

Satamori drew a hissing breath and with the sound the room seemed to fill with the chill of the northern winter (the Erikssons' home locked in Arctic night) and the threat of Ragnarok that rode the flood-tide of the skelter. Some time passed.

Eventually Mustapha said, his tone thoughtful, "One is inclined to wonder how the world views what one does. It's rare for an artist to be pleased to discover that what he is proud of is anonymous and uncredited, but in this instance that paradox is the truth. It was painful for me to discover that all the tenets I had been brought up to were false. But I am not alone in that. What perhaps I may claim to be alone in is that I did something about it."

"I'm glad that you said nothing about this before," Satamori snapped. "I might not have—"

He sounded as though he were threatening to rise. Mustapha reached out a hand to check him.

"My friend. I did not do what I did to insult you and your creed—only to give what light I could to the world after the light was stolen from my eyes." A wave at his bright but sightless gaze, turned by sound to confront and transfix the other man.

"I— Yes, granted." Satamori re-

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sumed his chair. "Even so I—"

"You still believe that doing honor to the ancestors is among a man's primary obligations. I will not contradict. I would prefer to—supplement." Mustapha's tone was persuasive without being downright wheedling, a narrow path to walk with words. "You must at least concede it's better to honor the ancestors for what they did right than for the mistakes which, had they the chance, they would repent?"

Satamori hesitated. "I believe I read a poem of yours on that subject," he muttered. "In translation, I'm afraid."

MUSTAPHA wanted to tremble—this was so close to what he had been worrying about within the past hour, the notion that someone would ultimately look at his work and see through it—but he overcame the impulse. Not a quaver showed in his voice as he answered. "I am always glad when somebody reads and recalls my poetry, in whatever version. But do you not concede I have a valid point?"

"I suppose I have to." Satamori heaved a deep sigh. "I do believe it was the—the continuity of our beliefs that carried us through the terrible period after the Blowup. And I do believe that if we hadn't had our respective faiths to use for crutches we might never have risen again—even as far as we have risen today."

"On the other hand," Mustapha said, "it was because we held to the beliefs that we did that we reached the point of striking out insanely in all directions with some of our most terrible weapons. The Blowup is now two generations in the past, but it has left so deep a scar on the collective psyche of mankind that we will go to any lengths to avoid a repetition. For an intelligent young person today it is more significant that we suffered a population crash corresponding with incredible precision to the example set by rabbits infected with myxomatosis—and that we have thus been shown subject to natural laws—than that idealistic dreamers in ancient times conceived of man as being superior to his animal cousins. Moreover, so many of us died. As we reopen the contaminated areas of the planet we find we are walking through a giant graveyard. It is almost literally impossible to ignore the presence of our forebears' dead bodies."

"You always had a sweet tongue, Mustapha," Satamori said. "Today you are excelling yourself—and you've touched me on a very raw spot, too. Half of me knows in my head that one must fight the superstitious fear of death or we shall forever be shut off from vast tracts of what are now again becoming habitable lands—and we need that space precisely because we did suffer a typical population crash. The other half of me stands in irrational awe of our ancestors, as though they had indeed become ghosts—or spirits, or whatever you call them—and ought not to be disturbed."

He set aside his coffee cup, now empty, and declined Ali's solicitous offer of a refill.

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"On the other hand, by inventing the privateer Chaim did free us from that terrifying abolition of privacy which was so alarming to us that we stopped at nothing to— But I said that to you before and didn't convince you."

"Nothing, I'm afraid, will convince me that applying the same principles that led to our near-suicide can rescue us from our remaining troubles," Mustapha said in a tone of regret. "I wish I could believe the opposite. To be able to do so would make life simpler, wouldn't it? But in fact I'm certain that only a complete reassessment of our place on the planet, our relationship to other life forms, in sum, an abdication of our arrogance, will enable us to escape another and another and maybe another absolutely final disaster similar to the Blowup. Skeptic though I am, I regard the teachings of the Way of Life as likely to encourage a proper humility in us, the sort of attitude that alone can permit us to survive."

He gathered the skirts of his gown and rose.

"So I shall not attend Chaim's treasure hunt—even by direct invitation. I have no wish to see another generation of managers, bureaucrats and administrators wrap this species of ours in their steel web of inflexible rules and regulations. I don't want to be party to the perpetuation of a system that condemned two-thirds of humanity to death. Better to expire of plague, starvation or cold than to be killed by the voluntary act of another man."

"In so many ways I agree and in so many I don't." Satamori also rose, shaking his head—Mustapha could hear the faint brushing of his nape hairs against the stiff collar of his formal coat.

"What it comes down to," Mustapha said, "is that mankind from now on must be governed by artists, not by politicians. There is no other conceivable manner in which a survival-prone society can be organized. We must evolve an aesthetic of government free from ideological trammels. We must commit our fate into the hands of those who derive artistic satisfaction from seeing a well-ordered community, who will crack their skulls into the small hours of the morning over a flaw in their schemes—as I may worry myself sleepless over a line in a poem until it suddenly turns head over heels and comes out right."

"You think those in power don't already worry like that?" Satamori countered wryly. "Oh, we do—we do! But, since the subject of your work has arisen by implication—and I have an hour to waste before continuing to Chaim's—I should much enjoy another tour of your ateliers—"

"It will be my pleasure," Mustapha said, bowing.

So they passed the next hour in walking around that part of Mustapha's home where his corps of assistants were at work. He had over a hundred now. They were orphans of both sexes whom he had recruited as little children—their parents being dead of violence or disease—and taught a trade that would furnish them employment

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for a lifetime. Some worked at copying out not only his poems but far more ancient texts, chiefly in Arabic. Some, though, were in European languages. For these they used a classic chancellery hand and illuminated the result with exquisite drawings based on models provided by the chief scribe, Muley Hassan. Others were busy in the papermill, converting old rags, straw, corn husks and a score of miscellaneous vegetable substances into fresh new deckle-edged sheets. Others again worked in the bindery, where the air was pleasantly scented with glue and size, putting the final touches to the volumes that commanded collectors' prices the world around, irrespective of whether the buyer could read the contents or not.

Satamori fell instantly in love with a collection of old folk tales and put down a deposit of five thousand to secure possession of it when it was finished and properly bound.

Interface F

Once a fool who loved gold
Killed his rival to possess
A lovely golden statue of a god.
Afraid of being caught
He melted the statue down
Saying fire could not destroy its worth.
They found him starved to death
In a waterless valley
His bare fingerbones clutching the gold.
I do not call him foolish
Because he could not eat gold
But because beauty is the food of the soul.

—Mustapha Sharif

HANS was shaking as he entered his darkroom. It was always like this when he returned from one of his secret expeditions. He was on edge because he could never tell in advance whether he would have anything to show for the risk he had run.

It was getting harder and harder to purchase reliable film. The Economics Authority, of course, knew to the last centimeter how much was currently being manufactured, so for a project of this kind he had to depend on recuperated stock, which all too often proved to have been fogged by radiation.

Neo-Polaroid was easier to come by—the available computing capacity was simply not up to determining whether or not a given buyer was telling the truth when he claimed he'd wasted half his last batch because he was drunk and had thrown the bad pictures in the garbage a month ago. But Hans would not have dared switch to it, because it had to be developed as soon as it was exposed. Carrying visual evidence of his surreptitious journeys would have been suicidal. A film could be blurred by springing the cap of its cassette—he had modified several specially, to make doing so easier in an emergency—and he always took along decoy film, too, exposed at places he was officially entitled to visit.

Dany, of course, was not party to his secret. She would have betrayed

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him in a fit of depression.

Moving with the ease of long practice in total darkness (and thinking about blindness as he worked), Hans decided that for once he would process his important film first, not the decoy he had shot on his way to rendezvous with Mustapha. That could serve again. In any case he was suspicious of its quality. He prepared his developing bath, opened the cassette with a tingle of excitement—

And was suddenly dazzled by brilliant light as the door was flung wide.

He stood rigid as a rock, looking at the ruined film in his hand.

A shrill voice gnawed at his mind like a worm attacking the core of an apple.

"Hans, you were right about Athens. There's a public skelter terminal called Lyceum, only they spell it a funny way. So I went there. But then somebody changed my card for another one and I can't figure this out either— Oh. Is something wrong?"

Gone: cobwebs. Gone: dust like snow unmarred by footprints. Gone: the irrecoverable "after" to pair with the reconstructed "before."

In the next five seconds he came close to murdering his wife. But he changed his mind. He thought of something sweeter and more fitting. He tossed aside the film and turned, cordial of expression and tone.

"Well, what does the second card say?"

She proffered it uncertainly. Like the first, it bore a clue in rhyme. The answer, unless he was overlooking something ridiculously subtle, must be Oaxaca.

"Can you work it out?" Dany pressed. "I do so much want to get to Aleuker's party!"

"Yes, I'm sure you do," he agreed, moving forward as though to obtain a better light on the card. And continued, having drawn a deep breath: "Only—what makes you think Aleuker will want you as a guest? He's inviting people intelligent enough to solve these puzzles for themselves. Knowledgeable people, well-informed, who will be interesting for him to be acquainted with. You, on the other hand, are stupid, silly, greedy, selfish, boring and totally inconsiderate of other people. When you burst in on me just now you wrecked something I set a lot of store by. It's gone past recall because you were too impatient to knock."

"But I asked if anything was wrong—" In a wail. He ignored the interruption.

"So I think it would be a good idea if I kept out of your way for a while, because if I see you again today I shall certainly beat you to a whimpering pulp. I'll go to Aleuker's party. When I get back I may have sweated out my anger."

"No! No, you wouldn't steal my chance—" Clawing at him with ineffective pudgy hands. He slapped her accurately on the left cheek and, as she shrank back, convinced by pain that he meant what he said, made for the skelter.

An echo of her curses seemed to follow him, though he knew that was impossible.

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It was not a short trip, nor a quick one, but he relished the going. At Oaxaca Concourse, overlooking the abandoned airport, it was raining and cracks in the concrete roof of the skelter hall allowed warm dirty water to drip down into plastic buckets.

A shabby young man exchanged the card Hans was carrying for still another, under the watchful eyes of the travel-hungry who pretended not to be. These were a vast group, hundreds strong, of so-called stucks, so terrified of skelter travel they could not summon up the courage to pass the nonexistent barrier dividing them from the clustered transit booths. It was not inability to pay that held them back—skelter travel cost nothing. There was no way of pricing infinite speed over nil net expenditure of power.

The shabby young man was contemptuous of the stucks and let it show, although he himself could no more use the skelters than could they. His reason, however, was tangible. He was a bracee—the telltale glint of bright metal shone under the cuff of one loose sleeve. He was far from home, moreover—he had the flat face of a North Chinese.

He did not even seem to know Hans had addressed him in English, and Hans was reminded of Mustapha's proteges.

For obvious reasons he had seldom visited his co-conspirator's home, but he vividly recalled that first trip he had made in order to establish his credentials as a collector of books likely to increase in value. He had been shown around.

Granted that the young people Mustapha took in and taught might otherwise have died in the gutter, granted that it must cost a vast amount every year to support them and purchase necessary supplies for the scriptorium and the bindery and the rest of the operation—Hans nonetheless had his own opinions about a setup that furnished so many nubile bed-companions. He was aware that Mustapha displayed the traditional Arabic indifference to their sex. Still, the link between those youngsters at Luxor and this youth at Oaxaca, was tenuous—it summed simply to the suspicion that the person handing out Aleuker's cards might well be Mustapha's type.

Why had the notion occurred to him at all?

The reason was instantly obvious. He had been wondering almost unconsciously what he would do if being deprived of her chance to attend Aleuker's party drove Dany to the pitch of leaving him.

He almost changed his mind and went home immediately. He was certain he would never again find himself a wife—there was far too much competition. But he steeled his resolution. It wasn't worth being married if he had to put up with the sort of thing Dany had just done to him. Better to live alone, rent a woman when he wanted to, maybe find a tolerable male companion—such as this braced youth, perhaps—to keep house—there was no shame attached to that.

In any case, he was being interrupted.

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Some of the eyes fixed on him as he studied his new card did not belong to stucks. A loose group of about a dozen travelers, mostly youthful, had spotted him as he addressed the shabby man. No doubt they, too, were following Aleuker's trail. How many invitations could the man have issued? If the net had been cast wide enough to entangle Dany the number logically ran to thousands.

Therefore, too, there must be many eager-beavers who were pursuing imagined shortcuts, punching LNA codes into sub-legal computers for Aleuker's last notified address—or were risking a bracelet by offering bribes to skelter system officials who might have heard a rumor about the actual location of the party.

Among the young people here present was an attractive girl in her early twenties, product of the fantastic mixing of the gene pool the skelter had brought about. Her face alone hinted at ancestors from at least three continents. She whispered something to a male companion of her own age and advanced boldly toward Hans, swinging her hips and donning a flashing smile.

Ordinarily, like any other man of his generation, Hans would have preened a little and relished the chance to exchange a mere dozen words with her. Right now he has immune to feminine wiles. He strode directly back to the nearest vacant transit booth and punched a code as though he had solved the riddle at a glance.

In fact he had not—he had simply made for the Gozo public outlet, the code for which he had long ago memorized because Karl Bonetti recieved his patients in a former hotel nearby, now rented out as offices. The skelter, inevitably, had killed the hotel business. There was no need for anybody to rent a room overnight, no matter how far he might be from home. He could work half a world away and sleep in his own bed. Karl did precisely that. Hans had a vague idea the psychiatrist actually lived somewhere in Greenland, but for good and sufficient reasons his home code was never divulged.

At the Gozo terminal Hans sat down on a stone bench and with some enjoyment—which surprised him because he had never before considered going to a treasure hunt—unraveled the complex double meanings of a mock haiku. They led him to Pitcairn Island and another young man with more cards, who seemed even worse off than the one at Oaxaca. This one had been braced twice and lacked his right hand as witness of the efficiency of the anti-tamper circuit in his first bracelet. Some attempt this young man presumably had made to remove the metal ring had fired a shaped charge, focused inward.

Very messy.

At Pitcairn Hans saw three recipients of cards hanging about. All were too shy to approach him. One was a woman in early middle age. The two men verged on the elderly and wore the air of scholars. In any case, Hans had no

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need to flee them for privacy—he solved the new clue instantly.

Bucharest. There was an excruciating pun on "lei", obviously designed to misdirect the less perceptive into making for Honolulu. And from Bucharest he stepped into a private skelter in New Zealand, thinking that if Dany ever learned how close she had been to her goal when she hit on Canterbury she would die of mortification. It would be great to tell her when he returned home.

He checked suddenly. He knew he had been given—now—a code for a private home and it was in the right part of the world. He was walking on a carpet in a spacious reception hall nearly thirty meters long. Curtains were drawn across its windows.

He was completely alone and surrounded by absolute dead silence.

Interface G

There were giants on the Earth in those days.
The fact is attested by scriptural authority.
Today you or I can walk around the globe in three strides.
It does not follow that you and I have become giants.
—Mustapha Sharif

The declining sun dappled the sea with highlights as exaggerated as a Van Gogh painting. Reclining on a chaise, Chaim Aleuker admired it between taking sips of his planter's punch. He was the very model of elegant success: lean, but with the suggestion of a developing paunch—extremely well dressed in a loose, casual shirt and breeches of real silk. His hair was immaculately coiffed and his fingers were bright with valuable antique rings.

His house—the largest of his three homes—overlooked a small cove with a northwestern aspect. On either side of it green hills ran down to stark rocks, but there was a smooth sandy beach between. A sailboat and a power launch bobbed at a tiny jetty. The scene could have belonged to the last century. There were few such sights to be found now anywhere on Earth.

Around him, sitting or strolling or standing in knots of two or three and chatting quietly, were the guests he had invited to form a nucleus for his treasure hunt. It was unlikely in the extreme that anybody new would arrive before eight P.M. local—indeed, he had a bet with Boris Pech of the Advancement Authority to that effect—and it was not yet seven-thirty.

So, to keep him company and also to assess the quality of any of the strangers who found their way through his careful maze of clues, he had notified some fifteen of his compeers to come direct. For a full generation after the Blowup personal power, influence, initiative had meant little. Humanity had existed in a totally constrained situation where it had been a real achievement to keep body and soul together—not that that phrase was current any longer. But now things were back on a more or less steady

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keel. A new balance had been struck—new class lines had been drawn. New meanings had been found for *rich* and *poor*.

In a very real sense this handful of people—ten men and five women—could be said to be in charge of Earth. They had rescued most from the wreckage and had laid down tracks onto which, with immense effort, society had been hoisted like a derailed locomotive. It was grunting forward again now, very cautiously in case there should prove to be other faults on the line. But progress was being made after a fashion.

The solution was not to everybody's taste. The elite (Aleuker hated the word) numbered about one per cent of the surviving population. This was a simple fact and stemmed from the terrible traumatic effects of the Blowup. Regardless of what reasons were offered by people to explain why they would have nothing to do with skelters, the truth could be expressed in one word—fear.

Because they were afraid to share what actually was available to all—except to those who had been given a bracelet for code-breaking or using the system for theft or to cover up a murder—the non-elite sometimes became jealous and tried to sabotage the work of the new managers. Now and then a mob would attack a skelter outlet. Now and then one would strike at the wealthy, individual by individual.

The elite was far too small. Its human resources were being stretched so taut one could hear them twang. Something had to be done to enlarge it. A casually amusing idea had cropped up recently in conversation: hold a treasure hunt, the kind of party so much enjoyed by small-minded folk on the lowest rung of the skelter-using ladder, but instead of merely employing it as a trivial diversion, turn it into a genuine test for those with sharp minds and the desire to better themselves.

It was incontestably worth trying, though Aleuker himself had little hope of its paying off.

"STILL expecting to win your bet with me, Chaim?" a voice demanded from his side.

The speaker was Boris Pech, affable, smart in blue suede, manager of the Advancement Authority, which was the most recent of the planetary administrative departments. It had grown from a tiny nucleus within the Economics Authority, charged with devising new means of exploiting what the old world had left lying about in such colossal quantities—spare parts for obsolete machinery, adult toys for which there was no longer any call, gambling machines and the like. Boris Pech had hit on countless new ploys and had elected himself automatically as head of the Advancement Authority when it had been created five years ago.

Its work was little publicized—the climate of public opinion was still against innovation. But sooner or later people would find out that it was still possible to make progress.

Chaim chuckled. "Only twenty

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minutes are left," he said. "And the clues we planted are pretty difficult. You were talking to Fred Satamori, weren't you? He was looking gloomy when he arrived—is something the matter with him?"

A waiter passed, carrying a tray of drinks and canapes. Boris helped himself before replying.

"Not really—but yes, in a way," he said eventually.

"I see. You've caught the riddle-making habit and now you're talking in mysterious gobbledegook."

"On the contrary. I'm speaking the literal truth. Fred stopped off to see Mustapha Sharif on his way here, assuming he'd be among the guests and thinking they might come along together. You know he's been collecting Mustapha's work longer than almost anybody else."

"Ah." Chaim tapped the side of his glass thoughtfully with one of his rings. "Was Mustapha angry at not having been invited?"

"Not at all. Fred said he wouldn't have come even if he had been invited. He doesn't approve of our trying to perpetuate the managerial system we've evolved."

"He finally came out and said it in so many words? That's interesting. And a little bit alarming."

Boris blinked. "I'm not with you."

Chaim stretched, relaxed again. "Maybe I exaggerate, but I do believe Mustapha is a dangerous man. Has it never struck you that he's quite literally the only one of—of us, for want of a better term, who has succeeded in integrating himself into a non-skelter community?"

"That makes him dangerous? I'd have said the contrary. It's high time we—"

"Naturally, naturally," Chaim interrupted. "But how has he done it? By ingratiating himself—by what can only be called overt dishonesty. Have you ever attended one of those sessions he holds on the big Moslem feast days—when the imams come and recite the Koran all night long? He's not a believer. Hell, he edited most of what now passes for the authentic teaching of Prince Knud and he doesn't believe in the Way of Life any more than you do. I take it you are still a good dialectical materialist?"

Boris chuckled. "About as much as anybody, these days. I don't imagine Papa Lenin—let alone Grandpa Marx—would find much to agree with me about if we had a chance to chat together. But it did happen, didn't it, that the Soviet model came handy when we had to try to reconstruct the world's economy?"

"Oh, we've stolen from it wholesale, but only under compulsion. If we hadn't forcibly redistributed the available resources far more than two-thirds of mankind would have died. If we hadn't taken steps to interfere whenever some petty local group decided to go seek vengeance—if we hadn't made it worth the while of those with the necessary talent to work with us instead of against us—No, without doing as we've done we'd never have made the repairs we have managed, makeshift though they are."

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"Mustapha won't concede our necessities, will he?"

"Indeed he won't. And I've never been quite sure why. I can't tell whether it's because he genuinely hates, on the gut level, everything about the old days and the old ways, or whether he's secretly ambitious."

BORIS's mouth rounded into an O. He said after a pause, "I recall a quotation, I think, though I can't remember the exact words. An English poet said that people in his profession—"

"Ah, yes. 'Unacknowledged lawgivers', isn't that it?"

"Yes, precisely. Was it Shelley?"

"I forget. But you're right to mention it in this context. At his home Mustapha behaves like a caliph. By acting out a role the local people recognize he has ingratiated himself dishonestly."

Boris hesitated. He said, "Even so, his is a white lie, surely. Life would be a lot easier for many of us, including yourself, if we did the same. It's no coincidence that so many of us now live on small islands, where one can get to know the local troublemakers personally and perhaps calm them down."

"Bribe them to calm down?"

"Occasionally one has to. When there's no alternative. It's as rigid a predicament as the world was in thirty years ago."

"No, no and again no," Chaim said. "One thing we must not do is build the foundations of the future on deception. I know there are people who hate my guts just on the other side of those hills." He jerked a thumb over his shoulders. "Sometimes I can practically feel their breath on the nape of my neck. Maoris who ran for shelter in the cozy dead end of their old traditional ways. White people of British stock who were brought up to believe their mother country was the greatest on Earth and don't even yet accept that it doesn't exist any longer. Nominally I'm a Jew—that gives them enough reason to hate me even though I bought my land legally. Some people have always been convinced that any Jew with a fortune came by it dishonestly. But the one thing we dare not be from now on is hypocritical, Boris. We mustn't imitate the lies that brought down the old world. We mustn't pretend that riches are a burden. We mustn't deprecate intelligence and we mustn't preach loving brotherhood with a Bible in one hand and an H-bomb in the other!"

Boris gave a sober nod. "We've taken steps in that direction. Making the skelter system free and open—"

"Hah!" Chaim gulped at his drink. "What does the village kid with ambitions see when he goes to a skelter outlet for the first time? Stucks, hundreds of them, and bracees, blocking his way! Sometimes they attack people trying to get into a transit booth."

"Yes, I've heard about that. We shall simply have to put guards on—"

"That's exactly what we must *not* do!" Chaim flared. "Armed patrols at skelter terminals? I can't think

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of a worse way of importing the foulness of the past into what we hope and pray will be a brighter future! As a matter of fact, that was the chief reason why I agreed to organize this party. I'm desperately hoping that somebody may turn up who thinks in terms of no guards, no guns, no locks. Come to that, no privateers. If we could only find a few people, just a handful, who've lived all their lives accepting the skelter as a fact—who've adjusted to it instead of regarding it as a fearful mechanical monster—" Looking lugubrious, he shook his head.

"What you just said reminded me," Boris murmured. "How is your private venture in rehabilitation coming along?"

"What? Oh, the wild girl? Badly, damn it. In fact, I'm minded to quit trying. I never realized before, not all the way down, how horrible the prejudices of the past must have been. Nor how crippling they could be to an innately intelligent child. I mean, she is effectively still a child. I've tried everything I can think of—persuasion, pleading, force of example, formal instruction, bribery. Doesn't work. They used to talk about people being afraid of their own shadows. What was done to her made her afraid of her own substance!"

"But she'll be around this evening?"

"I guess—maybe. I told her to join us. Don't waste time on her, though. It won't be worth it."

Suddenly a melodious chime rang out and everybody on the patio glanced reflexively in the direction of the sound. Instantly regaining his usual cordiality, Chaim jumped up, glancing at his watch.

"I just lost my bet! It isn't nearly eight o'clock and somebody has found the way here. I wonder who it can be."

Interface H

Doubtless you know better, O my beloved
Than to try and make me jealous of a rival.
The world holds so few intelligent, lovely girls
I'd feel it selfish to keep one all to myself.
Do, though, choose for lovers men I can respect.
Otherwise I shall lose all respect for you.

—Mustapha Sharif

At first puzzled, then beginning to grow annoyed, Hans advanced along the high-ceilinged room into which the skelter alleged to belong to Chaim Aleuker had delivered him. Its privateer had been turned off, which fitted with the notion of a party open to all comers. The room, however, didn't. At the far end were long tables over which were draped lumpy white cloths, concealing perhaps plates of food and glasses and bottles of liquor. On the walls were fine pictures of the sort one might imagine Aleuker buying. But there was no sound, not even music—nothing suggested a festive celebration.

Had he, by some miracle, arrived ahead of everybody else? Or was

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the whole affair a cruel hoax? One had heard that in the rarefied atmosphere of vast wealth and privilege people developed a distorted sense of humor.

Then a door opened and a pair of servants emerged: a footman and a maid in identical uniforms of green trimmed with white braid. Both of them were braced, of course; no one with free access to the skelter system had reason to accept menial employment. The girl had an ugly face—a scar ran down from her left temple to vanish under the high collar of her jacket. Nonetheless her figure was excellent: full-bosomed, small-waisted, broad-hipped. Hans wondered briefly why she had been so stupid as to get braced when she could have had her pick of a thousand eager men.

The pair wished him a good evening—yes, of course, here it must indeed be early evening—and the footman requested a look at the card that had brought him here. Having studied it, he asked Hans's name, repeated it under his breath and beckoned the newcomer toward the windows. The maid drew the drapes aside.

Revealed was a magnificent patio framed by greenery. Hans saw men and women in elegant clothing gazing toward him with an air of expectancy.

His mouth went dry. He had left home in such haste he had not bothered to change his clothes: a short-sleeved shirt and crumpled pants of cotton drill, light enough to be tucked inside a climatized suit. His pockets bulged with his darkroom oddments. He was unshaven and his hair was in a tangle.

"This way, sir," the footman urged. "My employer is eager to make your acquaintance."

It was too late to back down. The maid slid aside a section of the floor-to-ceiling window and Hans passed through to confront his host.

NEITHER man made any move to shake hands. The habit had gotten mislaid—there had been too many fatal contagious diseases. On the other hand, close friends kissed in public far more often than had been customary in the old western culture—a gesture that converted mere liking into willingness to share risks. Very strange. Hans cursed his head for being crowded with irrelevant data. All these faces, some white, some brown, some yellow . . .

"A great pleasure," Aleuker was saying warmly. "I'm afraid I didn't quite catch your name when my man repeated it."

"Hans Dykstra," he heard himself mutter. "I'm a recuperator, from—uh—"

He hesitated. Mentioning his profession was all right—it was respectable and respected, provided the practitioner was good at it. What he didn't know was whether it was correct form to refer to one's place of residence in a circle as exclusive as this one. Respect for privacy these days notoriously escalated in proportion with the square of one's wealth.

But Aleuker was looking expectant, so he completed the statement.

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"From Malta. Valletta, to be exact."

"Ah-hah? Haven't been there for ages," Aleuker said while Hans belatedly considered a corollary to his last assumption: suppose that obsession with the maintenance of privacy diminished as the means available to protect it increased? "Used to have a friend there. Maybe you know Christos Micallef?"

Hans shook his head.

"Lucky you. A thorough-going bastard—"

A bell chimed and Aleuker was suddenly looking past Hans.

"Looks as though the rush is starting. I hope we didn't underestimate the numbers—we had the whole project computed. Well, that's my headache, not yours. Have a drink, make yourself at home. Excuse me while I go welcome number two."

Hans turned and recognized the second arrival. It was the girl he had nearly met at Oaxaca. Aleuker was grinning from ear to ear. His jubilation faded a little when her boy friend followed her.

The incident should have been amusing. Hans, however, was in no mood to find anything funny. He felt as out of place here as a diehard Christian at a Way of Life ritual. Maybe he ought to leave again at once?

No, the hell with that. He'd brazen it out for an hour at least, make himself scarce when his absence had lasted long enough for Dany to have become contrite. His main purpose had been achieved—he was here. He had spoken to Aleuker personally. He fully expected he would be forgotten again in five minutes and it wouldn't worry anybody if he hung around in some quiet corner for a while.

He advanced on a passing waiter, helped himself to a glass of wine and, turning away, found himself being smiled at by a genial man in blue suede.

"THANKS for winning me my bet with Chaim," the man said. "It's not every day of the year one can take money off that fellow. He insisted, you see, that according to his computers—mine really, but what the hell—nobody would figure out those silly clues of his and arrive here before eight P.M. local. And then up you turn and blow his deadline to smithereens."

"Uh—did I?" Hans muttered, restraining himself from consulting his watch because it would show some utterly irrelevant hour.

"Why, yes. You clocked in well under the wire," the man in blue declared. "By the way, I'm Boris Pech. Did I hear you say you're a recuperator?"

"Not *the* Boris Pech?" Hans blurted.

"What?" The older man blinked. "Oh—yes, I guess you might say so. Advancement Authority, if that's what you mean. But I was about to ask you—do you ever work Europe, by any chance?"

"Uh—yes, now and then. When we get clearance to dig over a zone that's been pronounced free of plague and radiation."

"Ah. Then I wonder if you've come across anything that might

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help us out of a tight corner. We've combed North America, Russia, what little of Japan we can get at—without joy. Europe's our last hope really, though I guess there may be something in Brazil— But of course Brazil is about the most unhealthy spot on the planet nowadays."

"So I'm told," Hans muttered. There was even less news from the interior of South America currently than from Central Africa or China. Bloody wars were in progress there as a score of petty local lordlings tried to carve themselves new empires.

"Well, the problem's this," Pech went on. "A bunch of us landed a skelter on the moon last year, as you know, and doubtless you've been wondering why so far we haven't made any use of the damn thing."

Hans nodded. He'd heard about that venture, announced as the first earnest of man's ability to surpass the scientific achievements of the pre-skelter period. But he had never expected to find himself chatting casually with one of the experts responsible.

FAR off in his memory resonated something Dany had flung at him in a moment of inspiration during one of their quarrels and luckily never had the wit to repeat. It had wounded him. She had charged that he was forever grovelling at the feet of the past, scared of doing anything that might shape the future, even his personal future.

It was true he got little encouragement to act otherwise. His contact with people who had new ideas and the leverage to put them into effect was limited to reporting on the caches of industrial goods he unearthed. His task was to describe and identify them, not dictate to what use they should be put.

His one genuinely personal project would not be known until after his death—but that was merely sound sense.

Aloud he said, "Yes, the point has been puzzling me. Why is it?"

"Because our best measurements haven't given us the transmission span closer than two centimeters plus or minus. Of course over such a long distance that's too slack by an order of magnitude. Earthside the problem doesn't exist—to be out by a couple of millimeters doesn't signify and one can compensate automatically for crustal tides and other minor nuisances. So what we've all been dreaming of is a batch of those ultra-high-precision lasers that Zeiss of Jena were alleged to be working on when—"

Hans let him rattle on. He had not had the vaguest notion that the moon's distance had been measured to within two centimeters, but he wasn't about to admit it. Nor, come to that, was he going to do a lot of talking during the party. He was going to compel himself to listen.

It was clear from the way Pech spoke that English was no more his mother tongue than it was Hans's. Both he and Dany had been born to French and Flemish, he in Antwerp and she in a village near Liege.

But Pech used this language with a fluency and vocabulary that made

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Hans sound like a backward schoolboy, even though he had decreed to Dany when they first were married that they should use English in private as well as in public. She had agreed that the proposal was sensible. English was the first or second language of more people who had survived the Blow-up than any other. But it sat uncomfortably on his mind and he remained terribly aware of how small an area of its immense richness he had learned to exploit. And if Pech was typical of Aleuker's friends . . .

He was. So Hans stuck by his resolution and almost at once found it was both an advantage—for a patient listener was automatically defined as charming—and a shame. He seldom got along easily with strangers and he had fully expected these friends of Aleuker's to regard their treasure hunt as a joke. But they were not in the least patronizing. They clearly assumed that anybody who had solved the cryptic clues deserved to be treated as an equal.

Hans knew a warm glow. Almost he was tempted to mention what one day would add his own name to the roster of the famous—but he caught himself. (What the hell kind of wine was this anyhow?)

Never mind. To be treated by the members of this in-group as an equal, however temporarily, was an accolade. News had begun to be acceptable again during the past decade or so, as the race's psychological sores had begun to heal and, with the dissolution of nations, individuals now made the headlines. Such individuals, in fact, as these: "Fred, have you met Hans who was the first to find the party?" And Fred was the Okinawan scientist Frederick Satamori, deputy director of the Skelter Authority—what would he think if he knew himself to be face to face with a criminal? And: "Ingrid dear, I hear you lost your cats! Does that mean there are none left now?" And Hans found himself commiserating with Dr. Ingrid Castelnuovo, the biologist who had just failed to rescue the domestic cat from extinction and who was so much farther along the Way of Life he was half-ashamed to admit his own adherence to the faith.

He had imagined these persons to be unreal, unapproachable. Yet these dozen-odd personalities, Aleuker's closest friends, the winnowings of a vast acquaintanceship, were mingling contentedly with the strangers who kept pouring out of the unprivateered skelter. Many were shy, plainly retiring men of advanced years who must have been through agonies of indecision before concluding that a chance to meet Chaim Aleuker made it worth taking advantage of the clues their scholarship enabled them to decipher. Some were arrogant young student types clearly determined to prove they were a match for their elders. Several pretty un-bright girls and a great many more pretty un-bright boys had ridden here on the shirttails of lovers with higher IQs.

Fantastic. And a lot of fun. Hans's self-allotted hour was nearly up. He revised his deadline and decided to stay at least as long again.

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Interface I

Who is my neighbor?
The unknown inquired.
The teacher replied with a parable
Concerning one who was going on a journey.
Who is my neighbor?
I am asking it again.
Pharisees and Levites by the million
Pass by the other side of my skelter door.

—Mustapha Sharif

CHEERFULLY adrift on stimulating conversation, first-class liquor and delicious food—here in the far south the sea still bred safe fish and much of the ground could be farmed in the old-fashioned manner provided it was protected from rain—Hans gloated privately over his vision of tomorrow.

He was going to make Dany weep, actually weep, with his vivid description of the unique occasion she had cheated herself out of by ruining his precious film—not, of course, that she would have figured out the clues that had led him here. He would imply, in terms broad enough for her not to misconstrue, that he would have been happy to escort her to the party, deftly link her into discussions beyond her range, help her to leave behind an impression that while that guy Dykstra's wife might not be too much to look at she must be pretty bright behind that quiet facade. He had had to undertake similar chores for her throughout their marriage and he was confident he could have worked the trick even in this unprecedentedly distinguished company.

He caught sight again of Frederick Satamori on the far side of the patio as he orbited from one primary of conversation to the next, always welcome, and thought again of the enormity of the offenses he, Hans Dykstra, was committing by the scientist's standards.

This event would certainly have to be recorded in his secret files. One day somebody would read his account of this party and laugh.

HE HAD hoped for another chance to speak to Aleuker. He had an opening gambit ready—the presence of many plants in tubs and pots on this broad patio hinted that the owner might follow the Way of Life. But the opportunity eluded him. Basking in adulation, the inventor seemed to be holding forth to a large group of admirers every time he passed within earshot of Hans—always a different group, but always the same subject, the privateer.

"When I think of what would have happened to the world without it—" someone said loudly and Hans cynically thought: *What about what happened to the world in spite of it?*

Actually he experienced a silent shudder of agreement with the speaker. Stripped of virtually every other means of long-distance transport in the Blowup, mankind had had no viable alternative to the skelter. It was cheap, not very difficult to build and extremely reliable.

Yet it was in itself the cause of

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the Blowup and was nearly destroyed in the aftermath. Within a decade of its introduction the skelter had turned sour. It had threatened to infect the human race with world-wide ochlophobia.

Early models had had to be open to anybody who punched the proper code, whether friend or enemy, because it cost tens of thousands to activate the power-crystals. They were not designed to be switched on and off, only to resonate in a permanent state of excitement. If they were turned off they had to be sent back to the factory to be energized again and that would set the owner back three-quarters of the initial outlay.

In the terrible years immediately following the Blowup it had been touch and go whether any transportation system would survive—or whether every skelter on Earth would be smashed by rioting mobs sick of having bandits, criminals, JD's and even foreign soldiers pouring into their towns. The West had first hit on the idea of shipping saboteurs through the skelter into "enemy" territory, but when the East retaliated the privileged few who owned domestic skelters at that time lived—if they did live—to regret their investment. Skelters in the Combloc had all been public and under guard.

Not that guarding them had made much difference in the long run . . .

In the tortured belief that an invention made in his own country of Sweden had brought about the downfall of civilization, Prince Knud had been driven to create the doctrines of the Way of Life. He had scattered millions of copies in a hundred languages, at his own expense, to the far corners of the globe—a plea from the heart that humanity should cease to chase after gods and ideologies, learn to accept reality, recognize this near-Ragnarok as no more than the sort of population crash any species must endure if it overbred.

Pleading failed. It took Aleuker's invention of the privateer to restore a semblance of sanity to the world.

Barely in time the skelter ceased to be a menace and became the means of reconstruction, tying together the isolated fragments of a shattered civilization. Code-trading now was among the most heinous of twenty-first-century offenses, enforced as much by public opinion as by the sketchy, disorganized laws still being cobbled together from the scraps of a dozen inconsistent legal traditions.

(At that house in Umea—had it been spies or saboteurs who murdered the Erikssons? Mustapha had been convinced at once. On reflection, Hans found himself more ready to opt for criminals. Prisoners on the run before the advent of the bracelet would willingly have killed to make good their escape—and even more willingly after its introduction, when the skelter was the only mode of getting away.)

But life wasn't intolerable today. The resources that remained were being well exploited and new ones were being discovered—and one's friends might as conveniently live on another continent as across the street, which must be good. It

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would take a long time for mankind to digest its brutal lesson. At least, though, there was a culture that showed signs of evolving in a sane direction.

Hans gave a sage though slightly tipsy nod, telling himself solemnly that he was the guest of a universal benefactor and must not resent the fact that scores of other people kept getting between him and his host.

TIPSY? Might be a good idea to go check out the food on display in the hall where he had first found himself. There had been quiet music here on the patio for some time—within the past few minutes the volume had been turned up and several couples were dancing. Moreover, bright lights hidden among the trees or mounted on the eaves of the roof had been switched on. He hadn't noticed when darkness fell.

He wandered indoors, possessed himself of a plate and allowed a servant to load it with smoked reindeer venison, freshly cooked fish dressed with mayonnaise, and a crisp oriental salad, a typical contemporary combination. Hunger had smashed most of the barriers of prejudice that used to keep national cuisines apart. He ate with relish, wishing that at home he could afford to combine foodstuffs from three different parts of the world at every meal.

Having finished and taken yet another glass of wine from a circulating tray, he leaned back in his chair. It looked as though it were about time for him to quit at long last. He was midway along the reception hall, between the skelter and the windows that stood ajar to the patio. For perhaps thirty minutes or more no new arrivals had caused the bell to chime and the privateer had been reactivated. It would make good sense not to stretch his luck.

Then, suddenly, all his resolutions dissolved in the blink of an eye.

He happened to be looking toward a door set in the wall opposite when it opened a few centimeters and light fell on the face of a girl, large-eyed, shy as a fawn. She peered in, caught sight of him and at once made to shut the door again.

Without conscious volition he found he had closed the distance between them and was smiling at her from less than arm's length.

He heard his voice say, "Hello."

She answered in a language he hadn't heard for years—or rather, a dialect so close to the one he knew that he understood her perfectly. She muttered an excuse and tried to shut the door a second time.

He checked her by thrusting out his arm and demanded fiercely, "Are you Dutch? Or Flemish?"

Astonished, she let go of the edge of the door and jerked her head back, those wide dark eyes fixed on his face.

"No—I'm from Brazil, but—"

Brazil?

It was too much for him to figure out. She herself was too much—all he could concentrate on was her simply being here. She was not tall, but was slim and shapely under the plain long dress she wore. In sharp

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contrast to the gaudy finery of the other guests, the dress still let her be the loveliest woman present. Eloquent eyes, mouth generous, hair sleek and black, hands delicate, figure molding that dress delectably—in sum, she was beautiful. And young with it. She could have been any age from fourteen to twenty.

"Why are you hiding?" he rapped in his mother tongue. He reached for her hand, amazed at his own boldness. "A girl as pretty as you should be the star of the party—come on!"

For an instant she seemed inclined to resist. Then she yielded and came out into the hall with the air of a wild animal, casting timid glances to every side. Hans was aware that he was the focus of attention. He relished the sensation.

"You must have something to eat. Perhaps a glass of wine and—" Solicitous words he hadn't spoken for years flowed out of him and he was rewarded to hear her answer yes, yes please!

It wasn't Dutch she spoke, but the first cousin of Dutch—*Platt-deutsch.* How in the world did she come to speak a dialect like that in Brazil?

From behind him, suddenly, came Chaim Aleuker's voice: "Hans, I see you've found Barbara. Good luck to you—see if you can make her bloom a bit."

Hans started so violently he nearly spilled the plate of food he was loading for the girl. He swung around. But already Aleuker was past and vanishing in the direction of the patio.

"So you're called Barbara," he said.

The girl shook her head vigorously. "No, my name is Anneliese Schenker."

"But I'm sure Chaim called you—"

"It is a joke for him. He says that 'Barbara' means 'a wild girl'—and he thinks I'm a savage."

There was a ring of anger in her voice—she set her shoulders back, clenched her fists and glared after Aleuker.

Hans hesitated only a moment. Then he said, "I suspect you may want to tell somebody about yourself. And it cannot be easy to find people who speak your language. I do, more or less. Shall we go and sit over there out of the way? I promise I will listen to whatever you say."

He handed her the plate of food. She took it, her eyes on his face, and after a miniature eternity said, "Yes, please, sir. I would be so glad if I could talk to somebody properly instead of struggling with English that I only half understand."

Incredible, incredible! I'm holding a tete-a-tete *conversation with the girl every susceptible male in the place is eyeing . . . How did it happen? Never mind! Enjoy, enjoy!*

He concentrated on the tale she was unfolding.

She did indeed come from Brazil. The reason she spoke a language so close to his was that she was descended from a colony of German protestant fundamentalists who after World War I had decided they must cut themselves off from

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the fleshpots of wicked Europe and live a holy life in a new land.

Hans's mind boggled at the realization that he was talking to a Christian. This was like being transported back in time!

Refusing to accept cars, radios, telephones—let alone the skelter—with hand-axes and horse-ploughs they had built a flourishing little town a hundred miles from anywhere and called it Festeburg—after a religious song, she explained.

They traded produce locally and once or twice a year they loaded a boat with vegetables, cloth and handicrafts and rowed it downriver to a market town where they bartered for tools, nails, wire and other goods, mostly metal, which they could not manufacture themselves. Aside from that they had no contact with the larger world.

She had been told by her grandfather how news of the 1939 war reached the colony by word of mouth and the accident of a newspaper wrapped around a packet of seeds, and how the *Predikant* called everyone together for a day and a night and a day of nonstop prayer to avert God's wrath from his most faithful worshipers.

The trick must have worked. At any rate, World War II passed and nothing changed in Festeburg.

Prayer was less successful in the case of an epidemic which struck the community and killed Anneliese's mother. The girl's voice trembled. From her halting descriptions Hans deduced that the disease might have been influenza-M, third of the four deadly new strains hatched in the uplands of New Guinea which spread like wildfire after the introduction of the skelter. He didn't inquire too closely, though. He was too busy marveling at the chance that had brought him an emissary from a past he had imagined lost forever. Until only a couple of months ago this girl had lived in the pre-skelter age. In cultural terms she had been farther removed from the modern world than the Erikssons whose bodies he had disposed of earlier today. Or had it been yesterday?

"What happened to bring you here?" he urged.

Bit by reluctant bit, she explained. Somewhere in the *Sertao* a minor warlord had begun to carve out an empire in the usual manner. Among the places he coveted was the site of Festeburg.

There had been a siege. Her father had been killed. Her older brother, then head of the family, had ordered her to take a canoe and paddle downriver in search of help. With unbelievable courage, considering she had never been farther from home than she could walk in half a day, she had obeyed.

The first people she had come on were friends of Chaim Aleuker's cocking a snook at the dangers of modern South America by taking a camping vacation with the aid of a portable skelter. (Hans pursed his lips at that. A traveling skelter had to incorporate its own range-finding gear and cost a million if you could find a technician able to build you one.)

Aleuker's people hauled her out of the river when her canoe sprang

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a leak after hitting a submerged snag, but they couldn't talk to her until Aleuker turned up. She said she thought it was a miracle when he stepped from the coffin-sized box in the middle of the campsite. She had literally never dreamed of a skelter before.

But she thought it was even more miraculous when it turned out Aleuker spoke Yiddish and was able to communicate with her in a rudimentary fashion. She had been aware that other languages existed apart from the German dialect spoken at Festeburg, for the traders they dealt with spoke corrupt Portuguese, but girls were forbidden to talk to strangers.

Having puzzled out her story, Chaim persuaded his companions to collect their guns and set off for Festeburg. When they arrived there, however, they found it burning, its inhabitants exterminated.

Well—too bad! Everyone in the group had business to attend to and their vacation was too near its close for them to bother about the departed warlord and his troops. So in sheer despair, shaking with terror, she had let Chaim lead her into the skelter and bring her here.

In other words: to a place that, according to everything she had been brought up to believe, was a fair facsimile of hell.

Interface J

I am ashamed that I want to believe in judgment.
Punishment turns my guts sour
and I will not condemn.
If I did I would be among the guiltiest of all.
I am not, however, ashamed that those I would like to punish
Are those whose crime is despoiling their fellow men
And particularly little children of the rightful joy
They should have from the existence of their bodies.

—Mustapha Sharif

PERHAPS it was unfair to Aleuker—perhaps Hans was adding unjustified highlights to what the girl told him and in fact she was seeing rapists around every corner as a result of her appalling heritage—but the impression was quite clear that when Aleuker discovered Anneliese wasn't minded to pile straight into bed and make wild jungle love he lost interest.

One would assume that Aleuker had a normal appetite for women—indeed, one had heard that because of his fame he had enjoyed far more of them than his proper share. Serious for a moment, Hans wondered what it would be like to be in Aleuker's shoes, welcomed as a father for the babies of women around the world. Those lucky potential mothers who had proved to be naturally immune to CPF—as Dany was not; and in consequence she had been compulsorily sterilized—picked and chose their mates regardless of marriage, complying with constant and stern official warnings about letting the best of the gene pool go to waste.

Once, three years ago, without

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informing Dany, Hans had advertised himself as a sire in one of the crudely printed contact journals that circulated from continent to continent. With so few people remaining it had seemed a shame that he, Hans Dykstra, should leave behind no child at all, whether or not he could bring it up personally.

But the only girl who had answered had failed to show at the rendezvous he'd proposed in Canberra—and he had felt so silly he had never repeated the experiment.

He now put the memory once more out of his mind and composed himself to go on listening.

Anneliese had clung to Aleuker purely because she hadn't known where else to go. Like most Christians she had been taught to believe that even the followers of heretic branches of her own faith were children of the Evil One and eternally damned, so finding herself in a world full of what she termed heathens, who drank liquor, smoked, fornicated and bowed down to false gods, specifically to trees and animals, had come close to driving her out of her mind.

Only the fact that she hadn't spoken to anybody for weeks—bar a few sour exchanges with Aleuker and his servants—had impelled her tonight to look in on the party, as she had been told to do. All the time she was talking her eyes kept darting from the sight of one abomination to another, and her cheeks remained pale as paper.

When he had the chance, Hans demanded to know how old she was. She muttered, "Seventeen. Eighteen soon."

At that age, to have seen her father killed, her home burned, all her friends slaughtered . . . . Her story echoed an ancient nightmare of Hans's. He himself had been orphaned in the last epidemic of CPF and had watched his mother die screaming. Though he had been taken in by kindly foster parents instead of being dumped in one of the children's camps that were the breeding ground for twenty-first-century crime, his loss retained the power to wake him weeping in the night even now when he was well past thirty.

Dany had never sympathized with him, only complained at having her own sleep disturbed.

But he suspected that this girl might understand, instead of mocking a grown man for shedding tears.

SUDDENLY, with no warning, came a loud noise. The conversation flowing merrily in and outside the hall snapped short like a dry stick trod on by a heavy foot.

Somebody said into the silence that followed, "Hell, that was a gun—"

There was a concerted rush toward the sliding windows giving access to the patio—followed instantly by a melee as those wanting to go out met those wanting desperately to come in.

A confused sound of shouting rose. The guests pushed and milled and Anneliese laid her hand on Hans's, whispering, "Is something wrong?"

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He relished the touch of her fingers, so light, so warm, yet seeking. It was as though, through the touch, the essence of her fresh youthful body had permeated all his senses. The impact on him was like a drug.

Rising, daring to lay his own hand on her soft hair in a gesture midway between a pat of reassurance and an overt caress, he said, "I'll ask somebody. Don't worry—"

But he was too late. Another sharp noise cleft the air and a whole panel of taller-than-man sliding windows shattered. Hans had an instant vision of scores of mouths standing ajar in astonishment.

And then everybody between him and the outside dove flat to the floor, giving him a clear sight of what lay beyond.

At the mouth of the little cove overlooked by Aleuker's house a pair of small headlands bent to the sea, dark on dark but highlighted by the beams of a newly risen moon.

Between them, as though targeted in the sight of a rifle, three clusters of bright red-yellow flame admired their own reflections in the water.

The music had stopped. One could hear yells of savage anger. The wavering flames fell into place in Hans's mind.

War canoes!

HE HAD been vaguely aware for years that among the Maoris—as among individuals of virtually every ethnic group that had contrived to preserve a precarious identity distinct from the otherwise all-pervading culture of the Christian West—there was a violent new cult dedicated to vengeance. Its membership was made up of relatively few unassimilated Maoris, however, though their ranks had been swelled by half-caste defectors from the white-biased culture of New Zealand. He had never expected that these malcontents would be the people to launch an attack—and trap *him* in it.

But then he had only been to New Zealand twice before.

A long time seemed to pass, though it could only have been a few heartbeats, during which Hans felt his jaw hang foolishly loose, his gape matching that of everybody else in view. The moment of paralysis was ended this time by a barrage of shots and a scream that peaked to a treble—though it began in baritone—the voice of a man in mortal agony.

The war canoes had reached the shore and the torches were heading for the house. Rhythmic chanting rang out, paced by the stamp of many feet. As though terror had endowed him with telescopic vision, Hans saw a score of nearly naked brown men, some clutching guns, others spears, with necklaces of human teeth around their necks.

He listened as, at the top of his voice, Aleuker shouted, "Keep calm! I have machinegun posts—"

The words were cut short by the sewing-machine vibration of those guns, but the attackers had already achieved part of their goal. Three of the guests were coughing away their lifeblood on Aleuker's beautiful patio. Others were sobbing and

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moaning from minor injuries. And now the torches—soaked in oil, no doubt—were being put to their proper purpose. They arched through the air and landed on the roof of the house.

"Sir, please—what is happening?" Anneliese whimpered, clutching at Hans.

He recovered his presence of mind with an effort, glanced down at her and in the same moment saw that the skelter was a mere five steps away. It wouldn't be more than a few seconds before someone else thought of making a run for it.

"Come on!" he said sharply, dragging the girl to her feet. He pushed her furiously toward their way of escape.

"But I don't want to—"

"Stay and you'll get killed—" Hans forced her into the booth, his fingers automatically seeking the code for his home at Valletta. No time now to think of what Dany would say—all that mattered was flight.

Howls, shots, the crackle of flames taking hold, all vanished instantly—

And Anneliese screamed.

Hans wanted to, as well.

They were in his hallway. Facing the skelter, in the same chair where she had awaited his return from Sweden, as though she had arranged herself with care to be absolutely the first thing his eyes lit on—Dany.

Or rather, Dany's body.

She had cut her wrists and was saturated waist to feet with drying blood.

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THE HOOK, THE EYE AND THE WHIP

The prisoner had lost his life, yet he was doomed to live it!

MICHAEL G. CONEY

I

OFTEN in the spring evenings I would stroll down to the Skipper's Marina in Dollar Bay and

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watch the bonded S.P. men working on their bosses' boats. I would chat with them as they scraped, painted and varnished, and try to discover what made them tick. In general they were a cheerful lot and it was rarely that a man would openly admit that he was dissatisfied, or that he wished he had never elected to be bonded. Indeed, it was not always obvious that an S.P. man *was* bonded—for the rough work in the boat yards he wore coveralls with the letters S.P. front and back, just as did any other State Prisoner.

Perhaps the most interesting of these characters was Charles, Doug Marshall's man. I would see him at work even on weekends, scraping and filling, preparing the boat for the coming season while the Freemen and their chattering wives wandered about the slipway and the wharves, grotesque marine pets flopping at their heels. These weekends had become social events, each Freeman trying to outdo his fellow in hearty commendation of his own sleek boat, while the wives vied over such niceties as minipile cookers and autoflush heads. They would stand beside their boats, these Freemen would, patting them and stroking them like racehorse owners, meanwhile barking instructions at their bonded men.

Even Carioca Jones appeared on occasion—once she came wearing the slitheskin dress I had made for her the previous autumn and the emotion-sensitive skin turned a faint pink as our eyes met and we both thought of Joanna. Her young, smooth hands rose to her vulture's throat almost of their own accord, while her hard black eyes wrinkled in a smile.

"I must say I'm surprised to see *you* here, Joe, knowing your views," she greeted me.

"I like to look at the boats."

"Yes, but all these—*people,* darling. Aren't they simply *terrible?*"

"No worse than anyone else, I guess," I said coldly, wishing she would move on.

Carioca Jones was ostensibly a reformed character since the incident last year that had caused the entire Peninsula to ostracize her socially—a bitter blow for the ex-3-V star. Predictably for a woman of her drive and personality, she had thrown herself into a round of social do-gooding by way of atonement and was expected to become the next president of the Foes of Bondage Association, which had been making its presence felt around the Peninsula recently.

Unfortunately, anyone meeting her for the first time always commented on what beautiful hands she had for her age—and somewhere in the squalid workshops of the State Prison an S.P. girl named Joanna was now stitching coveralls with steel fingers.

One Friday afternoon in May I left the slithe farm in the capable hands of Dave Froehlich, my

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bonded man, and walked down to the Marina. By now the boats were in good shape—most of the paintwork having been completed—and the S.P. men were working on decks and below, polishing brass, overhauling engines. About twenty hydrofoils stood in line on their insect legs, looking virile and rakish.

—Alone among the S.P. men, Charles was working on the outside hull of his boss's boat, lubricating the heavy rollers of the Eye. I walked over and greeted him. He looked up from his work.

"Hi, Joe," he said. That was one of the things I liked about him. He was able to treat me as an equal and whenever I talked with him I forgot that he was a State Prisoner and I a Freeman.

Unlike my foreman Dave, who will address me as "Mr. Sagar" no matter how often I tell him to use my Christian name. Dave is a good man, but he will go on hating me until his time is served. Nothing personal about it—I just happen to be a Freeman.

"When are you going to get her in the water?" I asked Charles.

"About three weeks' time, I reckon." He stood, wiped his hands on his coveralls and gripped the huge steel loop of the Eye in both hands. He pulled, extending it on well-greased runners until it projected some eight feet from the hull of the boat, a giant polished metal D. He grinned at me and tapped it with a small hammer—it rang like a bell.

Rumor had it that an Eye-fractured in use down south somewhere last summer, although the accident was hushed up. A sling-glider must have complete confidence in his equipment. Satisfied, Charles gave the Eye a seemingly gentle push. Four hundred and twenty pounds of glittering steel-titanium alloy rolled smoothly back into the hull of the boat, the flat upright of the D—the outermost part of the Eye—fitting so snugly with the contours of the hull that the joining could hardly be seen.

Charles turned his attention to the Whip, which lay on the slipway beside the boat and stretched to a small mooring buoy out in the water—a total distance of some eighty yards. This year everyone had bought new Ultrafiber-X Whips—they lay rigid across the surface in parallel green lines.

"What do you think about, Charles?" I asked curiously. "When Doug's up in his glider and the Hook hits the Eye—what thoughts occur to you?"

He grinned, kneading grease into the attachment where the Whip joined the pilot's harness. "There's no time to think. I'm too busy pinning down the Whip, rolling out the Eye, trying to control the boat at the same time—while I listen to some damfool observer panicking in the stern."

I smiled, too. I had crewed for Doug Marshall as observer and had panicked when I thought the sling-

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glider had gotten out of control.

"But there's one thing I never think about," continued Charles. "You want me to say I worry about Doug's getting hurt, don't you?"

"It must occur to you."

"It doesn't. You'd have to be a glider pilot yourself to understand. I used to be a pilot a few years back. It's a new sport—we've got a lot to learn—but it's a great sport. Joe—there's nothing like the thrill of being up there in that little glider that's hardly bigger than yourself—at two hundred and fifty miles per hour."

Charles stood over six feet, blond and weatherbeaten—he looked the sling-glider type, though hardly the State Prisoner type. Doug Marshall had told me about that once. Charles had been sentenced for rape, of all things, after some incident on board his boat. I personally thought the whole thing sounded unlikely and obviously the judge had had his doubts, too—Charles only got four years.

He had applied for bonding—which carries an automatic one-third sentence remission—after he had served the six months compulsory. Doug Marshall had known him slightly in the past and had agreed to take him on. Charles was now bound by the terms of the one-sided contract to serve his master faithfully and well to the utmost of his ability, until the death of either party or completion of his sentence—whichever came sooner.

The sling-glider pilot is entirely in his steersman's hands.

I looked at Charles. Surely he must think *something* while Doug was in the air in that flimsy glider.

For example—he might think of Doug's dying. If that happened Charles' contract would be up and with it his sentence—he would be a free man. A Freeman.

For example—he had to think of Doug's possibly being seriously injured. In which case Charles would, as ever, be required to serve Doug to the utmost.

Which might mean the donation of an organ.

Charles worked on impassively, talking technicalities as he checked and greased Doug Marshall's harness.

It is difficult to define an air of suppressed excitement. It can be observed most easily, perhaps, in the way people will suddenly address comparative strangers, asking their views on whatever is causing the furor. Such an air was in evidence at the Skipper's Marina during those last few weeks before the start of the sling-gliding season. Freemen talked of competitions and Freewomen spoke of the clothes they would wear at the President's Opening Scratch Trophy—while at their feet, brought into unaccustomed proximity, land sharks fought German shepherds, pet octopi devoured micropekes.

The sloping landscape of the

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long slipway was busy every day and crowded on weekends when the owners arrived to assist or berate their S.P. men, according to personality. Huge boats towered everywhere. Men scuttled underneath with paintbrushes and powertools, putting on finishing touches.

I frequently dropped by on Sunday afternoons to assist Marshall. For a few hours I breathed sawdust and cellulose as we cleaned up the boat's interior—then we drank beer with him and Charles in the dim cabin as slow nightfall came. Sometimes other boat owners would climb the ladder, hammer on the cabin roof and shout a greeting, then squeeze into the small cabin to share our beer and prolong the party past midnight.

On the last Sunday before the season began Carioca Jones came again to the marina, spectacularly dressed, land shark flopping at her heels. The brute was growing fast—by now he was over six feet long. Doug Marshall was bent double and sweating as he adjusted the shear-pin on one of the props, when the land shark undulated over to lie beside him and watch him coldly, stinking like a fishmarket. The implanted oxygenator caused its gills to pulsate unpleasantly. Doug caught sight of the fish suddenly, straightened and cracked his head on the keel.

He had not liked Carioca Jones since the Joanna episode and now he exploded. "Get that bastard away from me before I put this drill through its skull!" He brandished his whirring powertool like a rapier.

Carioca hurried over and laid a hand on her pet's collar. She was wearing slitheskin gloves—products of my small factory—and I noticed they had turned mauve in sympathy with her temper. "Wilberforce is quite harmless." She spoke coolly enough. "There's no call to lose your temper with him, Mr. Marshall. He wasn't doing anything wrong."

"Wrong." Doug was massaging his scalp. "The swine nearly fractured my skull for me."

"Come now, Mr. Marshall. A big brave sling pilot shouldn't be frightened of a mere land shark, should he now?"

Doug recovered slightly, swallowed hard and spoke carefully. "Miss Jones, that fish is a menace. He's been allowed to grow too big. Look at those teeth. He could have your leg off without batting an eyelid. You ought to have him put down."

"Put down?" Carioca's gloves were purple and trembling. Doug met her stare levelly. She looked elsewhere for a scapegoat and, as I was edging out of the scene, Charles descended the ladder from the cockpit and glanced at the protagonists with interest. He was wearing his State Prison coveralls. Carioca's gaze lit on the letters S.P. and her eyes flashed. "Oh, so you

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have a slave here doing your work for you."

The abrupt change of subject foxed Doug. "What the hell's that got to do with it?" he asked, baffled. "Anyway, Charles is my bonded man."

"Oh, a bonded man, is he? I might have guessed. No wonder you love sling-gliding. Who wouldn't, with a spare-parts man standing by?"

Doug's eyes widened. He looked at Charles, who seemed to have been struck speechless. I couldn't think of much to say myself—arrant bad taste has that effect on me. Fortunately help was at hand in the unlikely guise of the club secretary, who happened to be passing. He stepped in quickly.

"Miss Jones, did I hear you rightly?"

"Who are you, you strange little man?"

Bryce Alcester, secretary of the Peninsula Sling-gliding Club, flushed. "I think I heard you use an expression we don't like around here, Miss Jones. Was I right? Did you use such an expression?" He was a small man with a face like a beaver, but he had reserves of determination.

"Of course you don't like the expression, because it's true. How else can men like you summon the nerve to go up in those nasty little gliders?"

"I must ask you to leave the premises, madam. I must also remind you that you are not a member."

"And I must tell you that the Foes of Bondage will picket the President's Trophy next week. You haven't heard the last of this, not by a long way."

Reluctantly, with Alcester's hand on her arm, she began to move away. Her eye caught mine. "Really, Joe, I can't think why you associate with such cowards."

After seeing her off the premises Alcester hurried back to us. There was a tear in the leg of his pants where the land shark had taken a snap at him. "I'm terribly sorry, gentlemen." He looked at Charles, swallowed and said awkwardly, "And, uh, I would like to apologize to you, Charles, on behalf of the club."

Charles smiled blandly. "I've been called names before."

Later that evening as we drank beer in the cabin I asked Charles, "What does it really feel like to be called—what Carioca called you?" I must have had several drinks by then.

Charles grinned. "Always trying to pump me, aren't you, Joe? I often wonder if you're a revolutionary on the quiet, gathering information."

"Maybe, but I'm not a Foe of Bondage."

"But Carioca Jones is right, you know," he said surprisingly. "I am a spare-parts man. I've wagered my body against a shorter sentence. I

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went into it with my eyes open and so far I've been lucky. I've still got all my limbs and other items. And I don't mind Doug's sling-gliding, because I've done it myself and I know the thrill of it. Now that's where Carioca Jones is wrong. I know that we would glide whether or not, uh, spare parts were available. Miss Jones doesn't know that. She can't. She's a woman."

I addressed Doug, pushing it a bit further. "Doug, suppose you smashed yourself up and you needed, say, a leg. Would you use Charles? Or would you spend the rest of your life limbless, watching Charles walk about whole?"

"The beer has brought honesty," said Doug quietly. "And I can say in honesty that I don't know. And it's one thing about myself I never want to know."

II

In the last days before the first race I had become totally infected with the sling-gliding fever. Up to then I had had no intention of competing despite Doug Marshall's hints about the difficulty he was having in finding a competent observer. I spent most afternoons and every evening on the slipway, helping with the feverish last-minute preparations. Sling-gliding has this in common with any sport where complex equipment is used: no matter how careful the preparations, no matter how long ago such preparations started, there is always a panic at the finish. The Skipper's Marina had put its truck at the disposal of the club and the vehicle was in constant use, commuting between Louise and the marina with suddenly remembered necessities.

Carioca Jones did not appear, although there were rumors from time to time of the form the picketing was going to take. Some said that the Foes of Bondage had hired a boat and intended to upset the racing by zigzagging across the course on the pretext that the sea was free to all. Then, a couple of days before the first race, they were seen with their banners and placards boarding a plane for Lake William in the far north. It seemed that some idiots were going to walk the glacial coast as far as Wall Bay, a distance of several hundred miles. There were three bonded men and a doctor in the party of ten—it was reported that the doctor was taking a full set of surgical instruments along in case someone suffered severe frostbite. Not only that, but there were backup parties hover-trucking supplies to remote rendezvous where the terrain was too broken and the weather too severe to allow aircraft to get in. The personnel for this hazardous task had been hired from the State Prison.

On the Thursday, under pressure from Doug, Charles and several beers, I agreed to join Doug's crew as observer. That evening I stayed

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late at the marina. I had—later—a hazy recollection of a party developing in the cramped space of somebody's cabin—but first I awoke with a powerful headache and a desire to be sick, to find that I was lying on the floor in unfamiliar surroundings. I crawled to my feet, got as far as the door and poked my head out into the chill night air.

After a few deep breaths I felt better. I glanced around the cabin and saw a sleeping girl, partly clothed, on one of the berths. Her mouth was hanging open and she was a mess—lipstick all over her face, hair matted. Crumpled around her throat was a slitheskin neckerchief, its dull brown hue testifying the extent to which she was drained of emotion. I hoped it wasn't I who had drained her and thought briefly of Charles and his rape case—and of how easy it is to transgress the law these days.

I shut the cabin door quietly behind me and stood in the cockpit of the beached hydrofoil, allowing the night breezes to cool my head. I felt sweaty and stale. It occurred to me that technically I was trespassing by being in the Skipper's Marina after the club was closed and without having a sleep-in permit. Since the shortage of State Prisoners—which hit the country last autumn—there has been a tightening up in various facets of the law and I'm not sure that trespass isn't one of them. I stepped over the cockpit coaming, found the ladder and climbed quietly down to the slipway.

The next thing I did was to trip over the Whip of the unknown boat and fall flat and noisily on my face. Whips are of incredible lightness and rigidity, particularly this season's improved models. The end of this particular Whip must have been balanced on a box—anyway, it followed me to the ground with a ringing clatter that set up a sympathetic resonance throughout its entire eighty-yard length, causing it to protest with a wail that must have come close to awakening the very fossils under the sedimentary mud of which the Peninsula is composed.

As I lay there trying not to vomit a scurrying, rustling noise came nearby and the hair at the nape of my neck prickled. The brute who made that noise could have been anything—Carioca Jones' appalling land shark was quite innocuous compared with some of the bizarre pets I had seen that spring. It was becoming unsafe to leave one's car or house at night, since many of the creatures, unsuited to human company, had escaped and were roaming the flat countryside, fighting one another and attacking man on sight.

I lay still and waited. The sounds continued: an uneven series of footsteps—or some sort of steps—an occasional clatter of a can of paint or similar slipway debris being

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knocked over and a vocal gasping noise I tried to tell myself was human. Encouragingly, the sounds began retreating and soon they faded away. I heard the distant whine of a hovercar starting up—then that too receded and all was quiet again.

Obviously there had been a trespasser among the boats. In the morning someone would find his paintwork scored or his rudder pintles loosened. That sort of thing annoys me—I just can't see the sense in it. I wished I'd had the courage to tackle the intruder.

Twenty minutes later I was driving through my farm gates. I got out of the car and listened. Everything seemed to be in order; the reptiles were uttering that bubbling sound that characterizes the contented slithe. Relieved, I made for the house. Recently I've been having trouble again with otters getting into the pens and carrying off the slithes and I had mentioned to Dave the necessity for strengthening our defenses. Increasingly there are dangerous predators at large on the Peninsula.

The following morning Dave and I made a tour of inspection. The little reptiles were in good shape, trotting about with a faintly red tone to their skins, the shade that denotes happiness and, presumably, health. As we threw the fodder over the chicken wire the slithes scurried forward, turning pink with pleasure and feeding voraciously. Dave gave one of his rare grins. Then, noticing me testing the strength of the chicken wire with my foot, his manner assumed its accustomed seriousness.

"I heard a rumor yesterday," he said. "Someone saw a garden barracuda loose over Long Beach way. This guy was walking along the nature trail at the back of the lagoon there and the bastard came for him straight out of the bushes, all snapping teeth—you know what they're like. It's getting serious. There are things running wild all over the place."

"I was thinking about that last night. Perhaps you'd get one of the men to double the wire. It's a good thing the brutes can't live long."

He glanced at me. "You haven't heard about the new oxygenator they've been implanting recently? It doesn't have to be renewed. They say it stimulates the gills into a modified operation. They do a bit of surgery on the beast as well, and then the fish or whatever is totally adapted to living on land for the rest of its life."

"I don't like the sound of that," I said. The possibilities this development opened up were somewhat alarming. At this moment a car drove up and saved me further anxiety on the subject.

"Hi, Joe darling." Carioca Jones.

"I thought you were up in the snow somewhere," I said tactlessly.

"Joe, it was the most idiotic

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hoax! Someone sent me a transcription of a Newspocket report up at Lake William and it sounded like the most heartrending thing. Dozens of poor S.P. men are supposedly being used as nothing better than pack animals. And there were some bonded men with the actual party, going across the glaciers—you know what frostbite is—and they had a surgeon with them as well. My dear, the report was positively sinister. I mean, you know and I know that I've learned my lesson and we both think these transplants are abominable. Barbaric."

"Yes," I said carefully, not looking at her hands.

"And when we got there with all our banners and placards nothing was happening! We marched down the street singing and everyone looked at us as though we were mad. And it was so cold—you've no idea! So we booked into the nearest hotel and I went to the local Newspocket agency—and do you know, they'd never even heard of the Great Arctic Trek, as it was supposed to be called."

"You must have been very disappointed."

She shot me a glance of birdlike suspicion but apparently my expression satisfied her. "Quite—and it was dreadfully embarrassing. We hadn't really allowed for the cold there. Some of my girls were frostbitten quite badly. They were very upset and four of them resigned from the Foes for good."

I nearly asked her just how badly those four had been hurt and whether, if surgery had been necessary, they had contacted the nearest State Prison. As Foes of Bondage, it was hardly likely they would have bonded S.P. girls. So if fingers were needed they would have to take their chances with the Ambulatory Organ Pool—a euphemism for long-term prisoners first on the list of compulsory donors. I nearly asked her, but I didn't.

Instead I asked, "Are men allowed to join the Foes?"

"Of course," she said firmly. "Whyever not?"

"I just wondered. The members all seem to be women."

"Oh, but that's the way it works out, my dear. You see, it's men who go in for these dangerous sports—it's men who get smashed up and need transplants—so naturally men will support the status quo."

"Pardon me, Carioca, but that's garbage. Only a fraction of the male population can afford to sling-glide or tramp through the Arctic."

"You men all stick together—that's the trouble. Look at you, Joe. You admit you're against legalized slavery, yet you've got your own bonded man and you're friendly with lice like Marshall who risk someone else's neck for fun. You wouldn't join the Foes of Bondage if I begged you to, so I won't bother."

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Just for the record, at this point I gave Carioca something from the depths of my soul, if I have one. "Dave Froehlich is a good man whom I rescued from that stinking prison—and I get no thanks from Dave. I'm friendly with Marshall because I enjoy his personality and to hell with his views—even if his views were unsound, which I doubt, I won't join the Foes because I'd be the only man there and people would look on me as a crank, added to which I don't agree with the Foes' methods. Regardless of whether or not the members are women, they are exactly the *type* of person I don't like. Your members get a vicarious personal satisfaction from the annoyance they cause others. Their methods are wrong, in that they think it right to counter problems with problems."

Carioca Jones' mouth had fallen agape. When I finished she hitched it up, thought a bit, then said, "You take the whole thing too seriously, Joe. The Foes are a club, that's all. A woman's club, if you will. This talk is nonsense. When we demonstrate we just think what fun it is to be doing it together. If it helps you any, Joe, I don't think the members consider the objects of the Association as deeply as you seem to do."

"Then we need a new Association. Damn it, Carioca, they shout obscenities at people."

"Well, isn't it fun to have the chance to shout obscenities at people without fear of any comeback?"

I nearly lost my temper—and a good customer. "I've never felt any desire to shout obscenities at people. That's the mentality of a teenage vandal."

She took my arm suddenly. "Oh, come on, Joe. Let's not quarrel. I came to do business with you. You and I are on the same side, basically. It's people like your friend Marshall I don't like. It was he who faked the Newspocket transcript, of course."

"Oh, come off it, Carioca."

"No, I mean it. It's typical of his sense of humor. And I can tell you, it's not so funny up at William Lake for a person of my age, Joe."

It was the first time I'd ever heard her mention her age. I changed the subject hastily. "You said you came to do business."

"Of course—you must be busy." Her manner had become stiff. "I'd like to buy four dozen slitheskin wristlets, please."

"Four dozen?"

"They're for the Foes of Bondage. We shall wear them at the demonstration tomorrow and they will show the solidarity of our feelings."

I had a mental image of four dozen Foes with fists upraised but with wristlets unfortunately showing colors of rainbow diversity. "Do you think it's wise?" I ventured.

"Look, Joe Sagar, do you want the business or don't you?"

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Resignedly I took her into the showroom. While she was selecting the wristlets she persisted in asking about Charles, his crime, his sentence. She seemed to be trying to work up a feeling of pity for the man.

II

ALTHOUGH THE President's trophy is the first event of the season and tends to be looked on as a mere hors d'oeuvre to the main course of races later in the summer, it is nevertheless an event worth winning. The psychological boost to the vistor will frequently start a winning vein in subsequent weeks that can be worth a good deal of prize money. And more than any other sport, sling-gliding depends on confidence. Confidence in one's glider, one's Whip, one's boat, one's observer and steersman—all of which comes with practice, but which is proved and improved by winning.

Traditionally, the main body of spectators gathers along the ancient stone sea wall that was one of the few human artifacts on the Peninsula to escape total destruction by the tidal waves of the Western Seaboard Slide. Here gather the curious, the casual, the enthusiasts—and the Foes of Bondage. Out across the bay, a half-mile distant, the gaunt pillar of the Fulcrum rises from the calm water.

The Foes had already picketed the entrance to the marina, screaming their epithets at the hovercars as they arrived with pilots, crews and maintenance men. On stepping from my own vehicle I had been surprised when a woman I hardly knew thrust herself before me and referred to my slithe farm as a "plantation." This was the latest dirty word unearthed by the Foes and apparently referred to some early phase of man's relationship with his fellows. When I replied, rather weakly, that I didn't plant anything at the farm—if the growing of crops was what she objected to—she merely uttered a jeering noise and called me a "boss man."

Then Carioca Jones appeared. "My God, Joe," she shrilled. "Do you mean to tell me you're actually taking part in this pantomime?"

Fortunately the press of the crowd had taken her away from me at this point, so I was spared the embarrassment of conversation.

The President's Trophy is a distance/placement event and not strictly a race because the time factor does not enter the judges' calculations—although the very fact of the high speeds attained during sling-gliding tend to cause the general public to refer to any event as a race. In this particular event the glider flies to a point out in the Strait, drops a marker and returns, the pilot endeavoring to land at a point as close as possible to the sea wall. A buoy, just offshore from the spectators, indicates the optimum.

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It is this finish close to the crowd—allied to the fact of its being the first event of the season—that gives the race its enormous popularity.

By the time the boats were cruising about, testing their engines, the Foes of Bondage had positioned themselves at a point near the northern end of the sea wall, close to the marina. From time to time their president, an elderly woman—and, I supposed, the woman Carioca Jones hoped to supplant—whipped them into a frenzy with a few well-turned phrases. She had an imposing, almost puritanical presence that lent weight to her oracular delivery. From my position at the end of the slipway I couldn't hear her words, but judging from the cheers of her supporters it was all good stuff. From time to time the Foes' fists would curve forward and upward in a fair and feminine imitation of a right uppercut—symbol of the Association—but the wristlets remained neutral brown. You can't fool slitheskin. Maybe the colors would come later, when the racing started.

In the distance a hydrofoil was racing toward the Fulcrum. The crowd was still. Behind the boat a tiny glider rose into the sky. It was too far away for us to see the Whip as the boat snapped around the Fulcrum, but we could judge the fearsome acceleration as the little dart was flung low above the water at a speed around two hundred and fifty miles per hour. For an instant we lost it against the trees of the dark island opposite, then it slipped into view above the strait. There was a murmur as those with binoculars saw the marker buoy drop away as the glider turned to make its approach. The distance of this buoy from the Fulcrum was taken into account in the final placings, encouraging pilots to go for speed and distance instead of merely stalling slowly in for an accurate landing.

Archer was gliding and he had squeezed a little too much distance from his speed. He was coming in fast and low after a wide turn and it was apparent he would not make the finishing buoy. Skimming the sea so close I'll swear he raised ripples on the calm surface, he used his last breath of flying speed in a shallow climb, then stalled and dropped into the water about two hundred yards away. The spectators clapped politely as he struggled clear of his harness and trod water waiting to be picked up. The Foes of Bondage were silent, watching. Their wristlets remained neutral to a woman—neither showing the purple of engaged distaste nor the pink of pleasure. I assumed they had done their homework and discovered that Archer had no bonded S.P. man.

I caught sight of Carioca Jones at the instant she glanced at me—and suddenly I knew that the Foes' rancor was being reserved for our

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boat and Doug Marshall in particular.

MARSHALL was gliding, Charles was steering and I was observing, sitting in the stern and watching for trouble, Charles' attention naturally being concentrated on the Fulcrum ahead. I stole a quick glance over my shoulder and saw the black post rising solitary out of the flat sea about half a mile ahead. I looked back and Marshall was waving.

"Right!" I shouted to Charles.

He gunned the motor. The Whip took the strain and rose dripping from the water with hardly a sag in its rigid length. A feather of foam appeared at Marshall's skis as he began to move, rising upright with the glider attached to his back like a bright vampire.

The boat rose on its foils and the last of the roiling wake fled abruptly astern to be replaced by twin hissing threads of spray. Marshall began to experience lift and kicked off the skis, raising his hands to grip the controls in the nose of the glider. He drew up his legs, jacknifing and thrusting them back into the slender fuselage. He was flying, the Whip attached to his chest harness with a snap-fastening. He sailed easily behind us at about fifty miles per hour, lying face down within the belly of the tiny dart-shaped glider. I suppressed a shudder—the takeoff always affects me like that, ever since Patterson's mistake last season. Patterson had grasped the controls clumsily—so we assumed afterward. Anyway, his glider had plunged down suddenly, the Whip had smashed through the nose, jamming. Then the angle of the Whip to the glider had taken it down through the water, deeper, deeper . . . I think the most terrifying thing was watching the Whip shortening, shortening despite the deceleration of the boat, as the glider and Patterson dove uncontrollably into the black pressure of the deeps. He must have descended over fifty feet in about eight seconds.

A sight not easily forgotten.

But Marshall was safely aloft and veering out toward our starboard beam, ready to take advantage of the initial effect of the Fulcrum post. He had banked and I could see him grinning at us, grinning with exhilaration, a six-foot man in a ten-foot glider.

At moments like this the oddest notions come to the front of one's racing stream of thoughts. Suddenly I was thinking of Thursday night on the slipway and of the fact that Doug Marshall seemed to be a target of the Foes of Bondage, who had returned from William Lake earlier than expected.

Charles hit the water brake for just the instant necessary to swing Doug directly abeam and, at precisely the right moment, leaned across to the Whip bracket . . .

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And slipped the pin easily into its housing, locking the Whip at right angles to the boat. He eased the throttle away and we leaped forward again, the glider riveted to a parallel course eighty yards from our port beam and matching our speed of about ninety miles per hour. I exhaled a gasp of relief which was lost in the scream of the turbines. Just for a moment the thought of sabotage had crossed my mind.

"Coming up!" shouted Charles.

I glanced around quickly and saw the Fulcrum post racing nearer, the giant Hook jutting out black and solid toward us. In June of last year, I think it was, Bennett had misjudged the clearance and run into the Hook . . .

Charles thumbed a button and the Eye slid out from the reinforced portside of the hull. The craft listed as the huge steel loop extended and I made the conventional sign to Marshall—the 0 of finger and thumb. He dipped in acknowledgment.

"Brace yourself!" shouted the bonded man. He leaned into the padded pillar to the right of the wheel. I huddled into the seat, cushioning my head in my hands.

The Hook engaged the Eye.

I probably screamed a little as the G's hit me—I'm told I usually do. The Hook engaged the Eye—and snatched the hydrofoil, by now traveling at around a hundred and twenty miles per hour, into a thirty-yard radius turn.

Around about this time I never know what's happening—I just cower there and wait for it to finish. I've seen it from a distance, of course, and it looks quite simple. The pilot has taken his glider to a station off the starboard of the boat, so that when the Hook engages the Eye, the boat veers sharply away. Despite its rigidity, the Whip bends. The glider begins to accelerate as the centrifugal force allied to the incredible strength of the Whip takes effect.

I've seen boats circle the Fulcrum post on the swiveling Hook so fast that the Whip spirals like a watchspring, the glider lagging behind at first but accelerating, accelerating until the Whip finally snaps straight and flings the glider outward at speeds of up to three hundred miles per hour. A glider ten feet long with a wingspan of perhaps seven feet, made of stressed permaplast . . .

There is a certain margin for error. If the observer senses that the glider is not in the correct position, that the pilot is not quite ready, he can tell the steersman to abort at any distance up to forty yards from the Fulcrum and the boat will veer right, slowing, while the pilot detaches the Whip from his harness, closes in and, stalling, drops into the water alongside. This is the textbook procedure, although I've seen teams take a wide, wide circle and approach the Hook

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again without dropping the glider.

As the G's forced my head into the backrest of the seat I again sensed something was wrong. I opened my eyes, saw the dizzy blur of water racing past, the gaunt blackness of the Fulcrum post partly obscuring the view. Then, climbing rapidly against the sky, the glider. The Whip spiraled back from Marshall, beyond my field of vision. I could see him fumbling one-handed with the release mechanism.

The glider lagged back, dropped out of view as the Whip curled. Marshall's snap fastening had jammed. He could not break clear of the Whip. Shortly all that coiled energy would be spent in smashing him into the sea—or whirling him and his glider into broken pieces vertically overhead . . .

ONCE, and once only, I saw a man make a perfect landing on the surface with the Whip still attached to his jammed fastening—yet that man died, too. Farrel. We watched from the shore as the Eye hit the Hook and the boat snapped into its turn at exceptionally high speed—the occasion was the finals of the National Distance Championships. The Whip coiled into a venomous high-tensile spring which reminds the overly imaginative of a striking cobra. Farrel had gone into his slow climb and was accelerating as the boat slowed at the post and the Whip began to straighten. Farrel's wife was watching through binoculars and I heard her gasp suddenly—a sudden gasp that was almost a scream. I remember the expression on the face of Farrel's bonded man—who was standing next to Mrs. Farrel—as he snatched the glasses from her and clamped them to his eyes. Mrs. Farrel turned to me. Her face was twisted and she was only able to utter one word—but it was probably the only word applicable to the situation.

"Why?" she asked.

And the boat had slowly descended from its hydrofoils and was wallowing around the Fulcrum, while the Whip spent its venom in hurling Farrel into a speed of three hundred miles per hour. He had stopped trying to fight the release mechanism now and was concentrating on his attitude, maintaining level flight as the Whip straightened and began to slow.

At this point the other spectators had realized something was wrong. Sometimes a foolhardy pilot will delay release until the very last instant of acceleration, taking chances on the control problems that arise with a dying Whip. But Farrel had gone past even that point. There was a slow murmur of communal horror.

There were also a few anticipatory chuckles from S.P. men standing near. Except for Farrel's man, of course—he stood like a statue, binoculars jammed against his face.

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The Whip slowed—although we couldn't tell from where we stood, the Whip must have been slowing—but still Farrel retained control, retained his horizontal attitude. He was rapidly losing lift due to the dragging effect of the Whip at his chest, but he avoided overcorrecting and plunging into the sea and he avoided the disastrous stall that would have started an end-over-end spin and a breakup of the glider. He was giving a masterly exhibition.

And it was all pointless, of course. There were murmurs of appreciation from around us and I think some people really thought Farrel was going to get away with it. But they didn't know sling-gliding the way the rest of us did. You *never* escape from a jammed fastening.

Farrel was decelerating visibly now, edging closer to the water, extricating his legs from the slender fuselage and dangling them, soles upturned, like a swan coming in to land.

An S.P. man chuckled, watching the Whip.

There was a communal sigh as Farrel touched the water and his speed fell to zero. He flipped the nose of the glider up in a last-minute stall. I think, even then, he felt he could avoid the inevitable if he could get the drag of the glider's surface area against the water in addition to his own weight.

He didn't make it. He was probably up to his waist in water when the Whip reacted. The deceleration had coiled it backward, building up a reverse tension which now exploded in snatching Farrel from the water and dragging him backward, end over end in the scattering remnants of his glider, spinning along the surface in a curved, frantic plume of spray . . .

The Whip waved to and fro a few times, gradually losing momentum, until at last it lay quiet and twitching on the surface and the boat was able to cast loose from the Hook and pick up Farrel. His neck was broken—his back and legs were broken. Hardly a bone in his body had escaped fracture—hardly an organ was not ruptured.

It might have been possible to do something about all that. But Farrel was dead, too.

It had taken just a few seconds. I remember the look on the face of the bonded man when they brought the body ashore. Absolved of all his obligations, his past crime, whatever it was, atoned for—released from his bond by the death of his principal, he was now a free man. He turned silently away from the drenched and broken thing they had laid on the sea wall and he walked off, saying nothing.

THEN Farrel, now Marshall. Pressed hard against the latex headrest, I watched helplessly as the Whip straightened, preparatory to coiling in the reverse direction,

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while Marshall stayed high in the sky, transfixed by the tip. I rolled my head against the force that held it and saw Charles fighting his way clear of the G-post. His eyes were wide and dead as they met mine—I knew he was going to try something desperate, but his motives were anybody's guess. He edged clear of the post and centrifugal force snatched him instantly from my view.

All this happened so quickly that I had every excuse for doing nothing—in any case, there was no way I could have gotten clear of the seat. Then the boat was slowing. The landscape ceased its crazy spin. The Fulcrum post became a solid object of iron and rust and rivets. As is the way of boats built for speed, ours stopped quickly. I stood up, my head reeling.

Marshall was clear, gliding landward, trailing the Whip behind him, the broken end hanging a short distance above the surface. I satisfied myself that he was descending quickly enough to avoid a stall—the Whip in total length is no aid to a smooth landing—and turned my attention to Charles. He was floundering in the water some twenty feet off the port bow. I grabbed the wheel, revved the engine and slipped it into reverse, backed clear of the Hook, retracted the Eye and motored toward him. I got my hands under his armpits and dragged him aboard. He was a big man, strong and heavy, but he was unable to help himself or me.

"Where's Doug?" he asked faintly.

"Almost down. He'll be okay." I glanced at the rig that fastened the Whip to the boat. The steel tubing was bent—the Whip itself had snapped off short where Charles' flying body had smashed into the swivel joint.

It was one of those occasions where the last thing you want to do is to consider the implications. I pillowed Charles' head on a lifejacket and spun the wheel, heading for shore. Marshall was traveling parallel to the sea wall now, diving to maintain speed and at the same time lose height before the trailing end of the Whip began to drag in the water and the abrupt deceleration began. Gauging the point of impact, I drove the boat on at full throttle.

Less than a minute later I was pulling Marshall from the water and extricating him from his harness, aided by men from a milling cluster of small boats. I pulled in against the sea wall and we carried Charles to the shore, laying him on the grass while someone ran to call the ambulopter.

Almost instantly, it seemed, the Foes of Bondage were standing over us in force and I shuddered involuntarily because I'll swear there was something akin to predatory satisfaction in their eyes as they looked at the broken figure of Charles, his soaked lifejacket

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oozing crimson. But he was alive.

Two women were to the fore—the president of the Foes, and Carioca Jones. Carioca was the first to speak. She indicated Marshall, who was bending over Charles lifting a bottle to the injured man's lips.

"That's the man I told you about, Evadne," the ex-3-V star said in a voice sufficiently loud for us all to hear. "He's the prankster who tried to get us all out of the way so that we couldn't spoil his fun. Well, you big brave man," she addressed Doug, "how do you feel now? Your man saved you—and we all know why. And now, look at him, poor thing."

There was a murmur of agreement from the Foes and I believe someone tried to start up a chant, but some remnants of decency prevailed. Not to be outdone by Carioca, the elderly Evadne said her piece.

"It is a terrible comment on our society when a man will, quite deliberately, risk his life to save another."

Fortunately there was a diversion at this juncture. A man stepped forward and touched Doug on the shoulder. He was carrying the harness that had been cut away from the glider. He indicated the snap release.

"Look, like you said, Doug. Someone's been fooling with this. The release pin's been bent. You can see the marks of pliers."

The crowd had gathered itself without conscious volition into two distinct factions around the bleeding man on the sea wall. To the landward side were the Foes of Bondage, an unyielding bloc of womanhood, upright and militant. Along the edge of the embankmend, backs to the sea, were the pilots, their crews and supporters, who up to now had been quietly on the defensive.

The mechanic's words changed this. Doug left Charles and stood, flushing. An angry muttering spread through the ranks of the pilots. The Foes backed off guiltily.

"I can assure you all—" began the president, hands fluttering, wristlet yellowing.

Carioca took one glance at her fading leader and knew her opportunity had come. She stepped forward boldly.

"It's quite obviously a frameup. And clever, too. Done by one of your own pilots with the object of discrediting the Foes and, incidentally, getting a competitor out of the way. Your treasurer himself told me he heard someone prowling about the slipway on Thursday night." Her black eyes blazed at the elderly man, forcing a nervous nodding agreement. "So there you are. Only club members are familiar with the slipway and the gear you use. And only a slave-owner would think this way, knowing that a bonded man would risk injury

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himself rather than allow harm to come to his master."

She bent forward over Charles. "You poor man," she said. "And you only had a year or so to go." Her voice hardened. "Couldn't you have taken the chance that the bastard would kill himself? You'd have been free, then."

She moved back a little, a theatrical gesture to direct the attention to Charles and ensure that we all heard his reply—so confident was Carioca Jones. Faintly, but growing louder, we could hear the hissing whine of the ambulopter. The Foes of Bondage wore righteous expressions as they contemplated their prize specimen, their *raison d'etre,* while he lay bleeding on the sea wall.

Charles managed a smile.

"I've been a Freeman since Thursday, Miss Jones."

IT WAS fairly typical of Carioca Jones to have forgotten the factor of Charles' one-third remission in her enthusiasm for the witch hunt. The uproar that followed Charles' revelation lasted in various ways for several months and was discussed whenever sling-gliders met that summer. The arguments waxed furious but it was all rather pointless because, in fact, there were not many bonded men involved in sling-gliding. Many a pilot had the same fear as Doug Marshall—if he were injured so seriously that he needed a transplant, what would he do? Better by far to be able to draw on the anonymity of the Ambulatory Organ Pool, which is not available to Freemen with their own bonded men. Nobody *wants* to take a limb from a person with whom he may be associated for years.

Charles made a good recovery although it was feared at first that he had suffered irreparable damage to both kidneys. Luckily the original diagnosis proved false.

In the strange, sometimes primitive atmosphere of the Peninsula issues are seldom clear-cut, and solutions or explanations almost never at hand. We never discovered just who had sabotaged Doug's equipment. Conversely, the Foes of Bondage failed to unmask the perpetrators of the Lake William hoax. There is a simple, neat possibility—but one we consider highly improbable. Things just don't work out that way around here.

Carioca Jones weathered the setback, of course. After the elderly Evadne resigned following the Charles incident she put her own name forward and was duly elected president of the Foes of Bondage. After a decent interval for things to quiet down she began to push herself and the Association forward as forcefully as ever.

People don't change on the Peninsula. Their fortunes may fluctuate but their characters are inflexibly formed by the time they arrive here. ★

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A TYPICAL DAY

. . . on a racecourse where the prize was—the right to be born!

DORIS PISERCHIA

IT BEGINS with me pulling away all the furniture Father shoved against the door the preceding night. He does it every night so he won't be able to get out and spill important secrets after he has had too much to drink.

Father is a boozehound. And a genius. And a tortured soul. That description would serve for just about any of the nuts who have ever given something to the world and have received stones in return. The world is good at shortchanging. It's ungrateful. Or maybe it's simply confused, like Father.

We live in a tower. It isn't ivory and it has no ivy growing on it. It's made of rough concrete blocks, is a hundred feet high and about seventy feet wide. Home.

Father hates the world.

Or himself. He loves me.

After putting the furniture back in place, I opened the door and looked out. What was to see? Nothing. A hallway and the elevator Father used once in a blue moon, when he took the jeep and went over the hills into town to stock up on food or to replenish his booze supply. It was a hick town. I suppose father and I were hicks.

The morning of my typical day didn't last long. I dusted the living room. I ate corn flakes. I turned the gas on under the lab beakers—same thing every time I got up. A humdrum existence, Father said. Maybe so. It was all right with me.

Lunch? I thought about it, looked at the clock. No, it wasn't time for lunch, which meant there was something I had forgotten to

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do. Schedules, schedules, what the hell did I leave out?

Oh, yeah, I forgot to watch the races. Checked the clock. Wrong. It wasn't time for the races. Hmmm. Oh, sure, I didn't wash my face and brush my teeth.

Did that. All finished. The phone rang.

"Hello."

"Hello. Hello?"

"Hello."

"Is that you, Doctor Dakis?"

"No, it ain't."

"Doctor? This is the University calling. Will you speak louder, please? I can't—"

"Every damned day of the week, you call. Same time, same place. Every damned day we go through the same spiel. I'm here, you're there, but there's simply no communicating between us. I know you, Miss Fat Rearend. Father told me your name. Miss Fat Rearend, will you please kiss my—"

"Hello. Doctor Dakis?"

She finally gave up and hung up.

"Get the hell off the phone!" Father roared from his bedroom.

"I'm off."

He didn't come out, turned over so hard the bed whacked the floor. In another minute I heard him snoring.

It started raining. I hung out the window in the north side of the tower and watched the silver needles fall from the sky. God, I loved rain. I spat down the tower, watched it mingle with the clean washing from heaven, saw it disappear, wished the world would renew its acquaintance with Father so his misery would go away like my spit. I'm eight years old.

The phone rang.

"Hello."

"Doctor Dakis?"

"Hi, Miss Fat Rearend. No, we ain't got no eggs for you today. And we ain't got no sperm, neither."

"Doctor Dakis?"

I screamed in her ear and she hung up.

"Get the hell off the phone!" Father roared from his bedroom. He turned over and went back to sleep.

He got up at noon and we had lunch together.

"Make me eat it," he said to me. His head dangled over his plate as if it had a broken connection.

I spooned some egg into his mouth. He grabbed his cup of coffee and gulped. I stuffed toast through his teeth. Again he gulped coffee. I held a strip of bacon and he nibbled that.

I made him eat two eggs, three strips of bacon and two slices of toast. After he finished he wiped his mouth, belched, looked sick, got up and stumbled into the bathroom.

"'Get the hell out," he growled—slammed the door in my face.

A bell rang somewhere. I ran to the open window, looked down. A blue truck was parked in the front

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yard and the driver was pounding on the door.

"What you want?" I said.

He backed away from the door, looked up, saw me and waved an envelope.

"Can't you read?" I said. "Put it in the basket and I'll pull it up."

He kept waving the envelope. I hung on the windowsill and watched him grow agitated. Finally he saw the basket, threw the envelope into it, gave me a severe glare and took his truck away.

The cable was from Germany. This time the zoo offered fifty thousand for the aphrodisiac.

"Who have you been talking to?" I said to Father as he came out of the bathroom. "I thought you didn't want anybody to know about the aphrodisiac."

He kicked a clothes hamper out of his way and hunted on a bureau top for a comb. He combed his hair, his most beautiful feature. It was long and white and wavy. His skin was almost as white as his hair, which was why he made me coax him to eat. His health was poor. I think if it wasn't for me he would have been dead long ago.

He combed his hair and smacked his lips, rubbed them with a trembly hand, looked at me with big sorrowful eyes. What he wanted was a stiff belt. What he expected me to bring him was a beer. What I got for him, out of the bureau, was a box of chocolate-covered cherries. With a shrug he took two and ate them, took two more and shoved them in his shirt pocket. He ate them before he got out the door. I had the box ready when he turned back. He had half a dozen.

Fine. When he ate candy he didn't have beer and when he had no beer he didn't follow it up with whisky. Today he would do some work. Marvelous, that candy. Me, too.

In the beginning, Father had no money and figured he would end on a farm, but he was too bright and went to school nights and eventually he got hooked on genetics. Or he hooked it. Everything he did was right. He took his Ph.D. and taught at the University. After a while he stopped teaching and did only research.

Sex wasn't something people did, according to Father. Sex was a phenomenon, like life. Gender wasn't sex. Sex was mating but not the mating of male and female people. It was the mating of living organisms inside people. Father didn't have a better word for the two things that joined to make a baby. Or he didn't want to go to the bother of explaining it to me in technical terms. "Bugs" was good enough. A girl bug and a boy bug mated and the whys and wherefores were mysteries to nearly everybody except my dad. A girl bug was an ovum, or an egg, while a boy bug was a sperm, or a beak. Beaks pierced eggs and the rest was downhill coasting.

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Bugs were too selective to suit most geneticists. Why did they seem to want to mate only with their own species? Anyhow, once a beak pierced an egg, the egg either died or accommodated the invader. This was hazardous joining on the microscopic level. Father never seemed to rise beyond this level as far as his personal life was concerned. At least, I didn't think he was mating with anyone . . . How did I get on this subject?

Father became famous when he invented the racecourse. We had one in the den. Plenty of people had them now.

IT WAS a daily chore of mine to clean the racecourse after lunch. I dismantled it, ran a clean wire through it and put it back together again. It was a transparent tube with an incubator in its center and two little bubbles on the ends. The whole thing was about twenty-four inches long.

As he watched me, Father said, "You take an egg—you think she has no personality? That little girl is complete within herself, eats, eliminates, breathes, moves—and damned if she doesn't have a purpose. That's to mate—butter and bread to her. She loves it. Another thing, she kills her lover when she's done with him."

I knew all that. He had told me many times. I knew the sperm, or beak, was suicidal and basically a rapist. He was sex-happy, had nothing else on his mind. He would mate or die—in fact, he would kill himself in the attempt rather than leave off. Father said the beak screamed just before he died. Father was working on a miniature amplifier to pick up their sounds. Anyhow, the beak was stupid, or else he didn't expect to get eaten, just wanted what he wanted and to hell with the consequences.

As for the egg, she had poor sensory equipment and recognized only sperm from her own species. Father wanted to study this phenomenon and find out why she would have nothing to do with certain sperm. He thought maybe it was their smell, or something simple like that. Often she turned down one of her own kind and took a total stranger—of course, Father had given the stranger a squirt of his invention so she would notice him. Or smell him. Or whatever it was eggs did. It was best to talk about them as if they were men and women, because, actually, the bugs were the only true sexes in the world. They were male or female and no maybes about it.

People were dumb. They thought they could jump in bed and that was all there was to it, but the bugs in their bodies were out to get together and nothing short of disaster or bad breath or body odor or whatever could stop them. The bugs didn't care about population control—there was plenty of clean space in their worlds. People didn't

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realize there were life forms in their bodies that could destroy the planet.

"I'm a male chauvinist pig," said Father. "I admit it. That's what half the people in this world call me. What it means is that I'm like the bugs inside me. I want what I want when I want it. I have no consideration. It's the same with women. They're female chauvinist pigs. If they can't get what they want they have a fit. They're larger extensions of the bugs inside them. If we all came up from the slime, we couldn't have been very big in those wet days. Still, who won the climb up the evolutionary ladder? Whose environment is polluted, who's killing each other off, who hates each other?" Father tapped his fingers on the table top. "I keep asking myself the same damned question—which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

He stopped talking. He stared up at the ceiling perplexed, bruised of soul.

I went on cleaning the racecourse. It was shaped like a female reproductive system. A sperm was ejected from a depository into one of the bubbles at the ends of the tube and an egg was ejected into the other bubble. Fluid carried them to the incubator where they were supposed to join. Sometimes they didn't. It depended upon how my dad was feeling. If he felt crabby or pensive, the sperm got a squirt of dad's invention—the aphrodisiac—and the joining was frenzied. If he felt sad or apprehensive the sperm got no treatment and the egg remained aloof and impenetrable.

Squirting an egg produced no reaction.

Father said the squirting muffled the sperm's undesirable qualities. What they were, he didn't know. He suspected the egg exuded a killer fluid that destroyed stranger sperm. He had better look, smell, taste or sound right or she would murder him before he did his duty.

THE rendezvous in the incubator in Father's lab always involved an egg and a sperm from different species. Once, long before, I asked him why and he said, "Who wants to mate a duo of human bugs? I know fellows who do that all the time. Nate Farrell likes it. He's at the University. Teaches a couple of classes and spends his spare time complaining about the liberalized abortion laws. He claims the fetus is alive at conception. In the basement of his house he whiles away the time by creating human fetuses in a racecourse. He dumps them in the toilet when he's done."

I watched a tiger and a lion run the race to the incubator. Of course they were really only bugs, but I knew where they had originated: Father could work wonders with dyes and gels. A little dab of colored gel on a sperm made him look pretty big, especially since the

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walls of the tube were made of magnifying glass. A yellow dot was a tiger sperm, a pink ball was a lion egg, et cetera. I had memorized them all.

The mating of tiger and lion bugs wasn't at all difficult, so I knew Father was feeling sad that day. Such a mating could have taken place in a zoo between two real animals. Racecourse mating between tiger and lion bugs occurred ninety nine times out of a hundred. In a zoo, these animals rarely mated and getting a baby from them was more rare.

I stood beside the table and watched the race. The course sat on a white table and was about at my eye level. The little yellow dot and the larger pink ball fell into the incubator, spied one another, had a tussle. The yellow dot stabbed hard, the pink ball squeezed him and gave him a thrill and then she opened and he fell in with a scream, after which she ate him. And I could have sworn I heard the scream.

The phone rang a moment later and Father stomped out of the lab. He never answered the phone, but he wouldn't get rid of it and I knew why. When it rang the outside world spoke—and Father needed to hear that sound.

I answered it. "Hello."

It was the same old thing. They couldn't hear me because of my speech impediment and all they wanted was to fleece my dad out of his formula. The University wanted him to come back to his professorship. Sometimes they offered him money for the formula, but not often, because they knew of the exorbitant offers he had received from abroad.

I thought he couldn't keep a secret, believed he had blabbed to someone in town during one of his drunken excursions. His explanation was that they had figured it out for themselves.

"They're idiots but they aren't morons," he said. "How can I send them a living dog-cat fetus in a box unless I know how to make the sperm bug acceptable? I tell them it was an accident. Sure. Then they beg me for more and I send them a sparrow-hamster fetus. It never ends. They bitch because the hybrids can't reproduce. Finally they conclude I'm doing something they can't do. Hell, I've always done that."

Either he wasn't telling me all of the truth or he had simply forgotten. The moochers might have guessed he knew how to make stranger-sperm acceptable, but it wasn't coincidence when they called the formula an aphrodisiac. Dad had called it that because it amused him to do so. The formula didn't heighten the bugs' desire to mate. That was already at fever pitch. Dad must have blabbed, probably to the bartender in town, a University fink planted there to pick up information.

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In the late afternoon Father took a nap and I read a book I had already read three times. It was about a distant-future Earth in which most life forms were integrated. The hero built a time-machine and traveled into the past to the twenty-first century when man was beginning to experiment with cross-breeding. The experimental subjects had survived mostly through the ignorance and errors of the experimenters. At first they were called freaks. They lived in communes and were subjected to persecutions. The hero of the book was so horrified by the hatred directed toward him by homo sapiens that he fled a few centuries into the future. There he found the situation less violent but nevertheless distressing. The freaks were still a minority but their customs and habits were threatening the overall structure of society. For instance, a morse (man-horse) married a mog (man-dog) and then they quarreled about the cuisine. Or a masnake married a mird and they quarreled about the sleeping and working hours. Within certain species it was customary for the male to care for the children—when they married more conventional strangers the loving couples had fights after the babies came. In the meantime homo sapiens—what was left of him—was desperately trying to preserve his own traditions. At the end of the book the hero became disgusted with humanity and its myriad shapes and philosophies. He went home to the future, smashed his time-machine, sank his roots twenty feet into the ground, veiled his face with his weeping hair so the women would leave him alone and then he spent the next hundred years brooding.

I enjoyed reading the book again. It helped me to understand Father better. He wasn't like the men who made bombs or deadly bacteria—he was aware of his moral dilemma. Should he give the world the aphrodisiac or not? He drank because he was double-damned and he hated the world because it always peered over his shoulder.

I told him about the book while we ate supper.

"Talk!" he said, as he eyed his plate with revulsion. "Remember how you used to do it when you were small? Try to recreate those sounds."

I gabbed, chattered, ran at the mouth. I said there was always a hero somewhere, like in the book. If a holocaust was observed by a single objective eye, that holocaust hadn't occurred in vain. In other words, my dad should give up the aphrodisiac. The consequences would become mundane history. It wouldn't be the same as dumping a gallon of botulism in the East River. Fallout from a nuclear explosion was a compound fracture of the moral femur. Like a bomb, the aphrodisiac was a potential bone-

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breaker, but only because people were stiff-necked and unimaginative.

"That isn't the way to talk!" said Father. A piece of lettuce disappeared between his teeth. "You know damned well you're doing it all under your breath. Nobody can hear you. You have every right to talk out loud. Use your larynx and your mind and your desire—"

Spilling my milk, I said, "I will when you break all your bottles."

I understood. He worried about things like anti-abortion groups. We all had a big wide wonderful planet in which to botch things up. Another word for world was trial-and-error.

"Don't cry," I said. "You're like everybody you loathe. I love you. You care."

"Come here."

I shook my head.

He ate a boiled potato. "Come here."

"It isn't time. We have our family relationship after supper—while we watch TV, when the tower is shut up like a grave and all the kibitzers out there have put you out of mind until another day."

LATER we settled down in front of the TV and he held me in his lap.

"Whisper in my ear," he said. "As loud as you can. Break my eardrum."

I watched the cowboys shoot up the town. And in the meantime I smelled my father. The hair on his chest tickled my nose. He stroked my legs, my back, my hair, he pinched my cheek, pressed his nose against mine and we stared into each other's eyes until mine crossed.

He was clever, but he gave me his mind when he fathered me, lent me too much of his savvy. He stroked me to draw me to him; desired for us to have a meeting of souls.

"I won't say I can't," I said. "I'll say I won't. Does that make sense?"

"Don't let them hurt you. You can be anything you want."

"I don't want to be anything. I just want to be."

He took my chin between his big hands. "Say, 'ah.'"

"Ah."

"Not just with your mouth. Make the world hear."

"Ah."

"See my tears? Do you enjoy breaking your old dad's heart?"

"You're a souse."

"Say something to me out loud. Scream at me."

"You ought to use a little soap and water to clean your ears. Christ, they're like caves of dirty gold."

He squeezed me until my ribs crunched. I howled, but soundlessly.

"One day we'll leave this goddamned tower," he said. "You think about that. We'll walk down

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the main street of New York City. Hand in hand. When they all come out and say, 'Doctor Dakis, you and your child are welcome in this world,' that's the day I'll hand them the aphrodisiac."

He believed I was suffering. I was. Said I, "On the day you break your bottles—that's the day I'll walk out of here with you. I'll go on TV, if you like. I'll yell through a microphone. Everybody from Guam to the Virgin Islands will hear me. Except we'll have to come back here to the tower every night. It isn't me who prevents my talking out loud. I do it for you. They don't hurt me that much. But you hurt me, all the days of my life. I won't talk because you drink. You drink because you're jealous."

I laid my head on his shoulder.

"Don't do that," he said.

Couldn't be helped. Getting sleepy. Thumb in mouth. Suck, suck, it helped me to fantasize. Suck, suck.

Father tried to hold me back. "I'll snuggle you all night, I'll keep you warm, I'll comfort you. Stay with me."

Suck, suck. I dreamed—halfway here, halfway in another world. One was as bad or as good as the other since both were safely remote. I soared in luxurious comfort. Away in the distance Father called to me. I knew why. He was an almost perfect person. His one fault was that he was intolerant.

Someone called, and this time it was another. The voice was my imagination, or at least I thought it was. I never really asked.

Father held me fast. I yanked away. I left him to his bottles that waited for him everywhere in the tower. Father, I can't help this thing. Maybe we both have a bridge to cross. Perhaps someday I'll stay with you at night, you'll break your bottles, we'll go outside again, I'll talk your head off, we'll grow up together. I love you.

I opened the door at the end of the hall and closed it behind me. The big room was dark and silent, but not totally silent. The snakes in their cages watched me, warned me not to touch their screens. The guinea pigs thought it might be morning and whistled for breakfast, the dogs whimpered as nightmares threatened, the baboon cursed me for trailing my hand across his bars.

Stopping beside the last cage, I took off my clothes, opened the door, quietly slipped inside and walked to the cot in the corner. Her arms lifted and I fell into them as a sinner enters heaven: with exhausted happiness. Deep into her hairy bosom I nestled. We kissed, kissed, kissed. She licked my face, fumbled over my hairless body for nonexistent fleas. Carefully she squeezed, lest she destroy me. I lay with my cheek against my mother's breast, felt her powerful arms tighten around me and I let the world go to hell while I slept. ★

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GALAXY BOOKSHELF

Theodore Sturgeon

BEFORE I review, let me preview. Something really exciting and important has happened and here's the back story:

A lot of years ago—it was in the '50s—I attended a science fiction writers' conference at Milford, Pa. I remember that Judy Merill was there, Fred Pohl, Damon Knight and an up-and-comer named Ellison. One evening we were sitting on the lawn around a tape recorder (I wonder what happened to that tape?) pursuing some writers' technicality when I looked around that circle of faces and interrupted with "Hey. How come we're all white?"

I remember well the startled look that appeared on all those white faces. I don't recall the ensuing discussion, except that everyone was appalled and concerned. Science fiction people exhibit all spots on the spectrum of political conviction, but it is safe to say categorically that no group anywhere cares less about race. (I recall an introduction to one of Don Ward's anthologies written, I think, by Orson Welles, titled: *Can a Martian Help It If He's Colored Green?*) And one of the Worldcons, in the days before Martin Luther King, was moved to an alternate city when the first-choice hotel turned out to be "white only." Science fiction people as a class are interested in far more sweeping concerns than prejudice, which by its nature demands a narrow head.

Nevertheless, attendance at any con of any size—or a writing course or a science fiction club meeting will show a statistically negligible quantum of black. There are so few black writers in the medium that "none" is a close approximation—there are no black editors or pub-

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lishers, very few black fans. How many black fanpubs there are I really don't know, but I bet you could cover their postage by shaking, not breaking, your piggybank.

On a speaking trip last year I brought a recorder with me and corralled every writer I could find—or find time for—and sat him down for an interview. After a couple of lulling questions like *Why do you write sf—you're good enough to write anything* . . . I threw this knobby one at them: *How come we're all white?* The answers I got are pretty fascinating and I'll have more to say about them some other time.

Well, the other day Roger Elwood called me with yet another plea for another story for another anthology. I have already gone on record to say that I have developed mixed feelings about this tireless editor's impact on the field, for while he has caused some large publishers—and more than a few small ones—to publish science fiction, though they have never done so before (which is good for us all), he has also produced so many anthologies in such a short time that he threatens to corner the market, saturating the buyers' ability to buy and other editors' ability to sell. And I do not want my Silverberg or Disch or Carr or Knight or Harrison threatened. Therefore I have, of recent months, respectfully declined his requests—respectfully and regretfully, too, because he does turn out some good ones.

In this instance, however, when I chattily mentioned this preoccupation of mine and mentioned the tapes I have, he rose to bait like a speckled trout in Wormsville, hung up, checked with a publisher and called me back. How about an anthology of sf stories by and about blacks—would I then write one? I said probably not—writing stories is an arduous and bloodletting thing for me and I don't like to make promises I might not keep. But I sure as hell would (should I say sure as Elwood? Sorry.) write an intro and, if I can get the permissions, include transcripts of those tapes. One of these, by the way, is an interview with a bona fide black science fiction fan—and it's the best of the lot. His name is Lancelot Braithwaite and he is thoughtful, articulate, Trinidadian, and a would-be writer. This is my challenge to him and to any other black who reads this or hears about it to get with it and write a story. Not an essay—I'll handle that department. And don't send it to me; I don't answer my mail, any of it—it's my pathology. Send it to Roger Elwood or his publisher, in this case Bobbs-Merrill of Indianapolis. It'll be a mixed anthology, because there are a few previously printed yarns written by whites which have just got to be in this book.

And just to remove any taint of self-aggrandizement from this pro-

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ject: I stand to get paid by the word for my preface. I will donate my net as a prize for the best science fiction story by a black in the book. Roger Elwood and I will between us find an impartial judge to make the award, to be added to the regular payment. I guess it'll be about a year before the book can be in your hands, but the deadline will be somewhat less than half that.

We've done rather better with another of our minorities—minors. Science fiction and science fantasy have always had a strong and steady market for the young reader, though as in the mainstream, it frequently is not called sf. The new growth, popularity, and respectability of the medium has its impact in this area too, as you can see in any bookstore by fanning through the kid shelves. Some hardy perennials: all of the "Paul French" (Isaac Asimov) juveniles and all of Heinlein's are now in paperback and holding their own. And Andre Norton.

I do not know Andre Norton, nor do I know anyone who does. If I met her and found her deeply embittered at the science fiction fraternity I could only agree with her feelings. I could be wrong, but as far as I know she has never attended a con and probably has never been invited to one. She is seldom or never reviewed in the magazines and I don't know if she has ever sold to one or been asked to. I can't remember ever seeing her name on a Hugo or Nebula nomination, and if she ever appeared on radio or TV I haven't heard of it. Yet she is astonishingly prolific and, judging by the number of titles to be found in print, her sales are probably up there with Heinlein, Asimov and Vonnegut. The Bible and a couple of cookbooks outsell anything on the best-seller lists, year after year—she's like that. I will say in all justice—and expressing my own personal taste—that I have never read a great Norton, but by golly I've never read a bad one and I wouldn't hesitate to give any of hers to a bright kid who is just finding out about science fiction. For myself, as I said, I must declare that I have not been able to become a Norton fan. Her protagonists always win, which for me substracts suspense; nobody ever has acne or goes to the bathroom or makes a pass; and more often than not the hero is the same at the end of the book as he is at the beginning, having been altered not at all by the events of the narrative. Which is okay if you're the last angry man or Lazarus Long—otherwise not. Still, what do you want for the appetizer in the reading diet of a voracious youngster: *Barefoot in the Head?*

Good typical Norton is *Here Abide Monsters* (Atheneum, 215 pp., $5.95), a gateway-to-another-world story in which a teen-

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aged couple slip through into an alien Earth full of extraterrestrial invaders and fabulous beasts. Norton as editor (with Ernestine Donaldy) gives us *Gates of Tomorrow* (Atheneum, 264 pp., $6.50) with the subtitle: "An Introduction to Science Fiction" and it would serve that function well for a kid or anybody. Not one of the stories was written expressly for the young, which immunizes the book from "writing down." The arrangement is ingenious, with one story for each of a dozen categories—first contact, future catastrophe, and the like. The writers are good ones at or near their best—Frank Belknap Long, Ray Bradbury, Fritz Lieber and others as fine.

IN THE gee-whiz or pulp-core level there's *Perry Rhodan*, a German series which, I am told, has hundreds of thousands of addicts overseas, and which is translated for local consumption by Wendayne Ackerman at the impressive rate of two a month—from Ace, at 75¢. You can subscribe to the books as if they were magazines, and each volume contains a Perry Rhodan adventure, some short stories, a letter column, and a communication from the fortunately unique head of the editor, Forrest J. Ackerman.

HUGH WALTERS is a pleasant pedant whose approach to science fiction is about that of middle Gernsback. And don't knock it—they don't hardly make that kind no more. *First Contact* (Thomas Nelson, 174 pp., $5.95) is about a first contact between us savages and the immensely more civilized Other. The technology is logically extrapolated and explained at length, which tends to make the people secondary—still, that's what the man does and he does it competently, so that any kid has to come out of it knowing more, factually, than he did when he went in. If he wants to find out more about people, he can get that elsewhere. In sharp contrast is *Trillions*, by Nicholas Fisk (Pantheon Books, 158 pp., $4.95) a most unusual invasion story, full of people you'll like and developments you didn't expect. The invaders are tiny faceted jewel-like things that descend in clouds, drift like snow, seem harmless but . . . Inventive as this is, it's the people you take away with you. I hope to see more by this writer.

ELWOOD at work: *Children of Infinity* (Franklin Watts Inc., illustrated by Jacqui Morgan, intro. by Lester del Rey, 178 pp., $5.95); *The Other Side of Tomorrow* (Random House, illustrated by Herbert Danska, 207 pp., $3.95) and *Science Fiction Tales*, subtitled: "Invaders, Creatures and Other Worlds" (Rand McNally, illustrated by Rod Ruth, intro by Theodore Sturgeon, 125 pp.,

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$3.95). I have learned of, but not seen, a second Rand McNally volume for young people on "Monsters" which I assume is the same size, price and appearance (very good, that, by the way) as the *Tales*. These are all books of original stories. All of the Random House ones are by established names; the others are astutely packaged mixtures of these and new writers. They're all worth looking at if you're buying for a youngster.

A REALLY wonderful volume is Jane Yolen's *Zoo 2000* (Seabury Press, 220 pp., $6.50.) A dozen titles about fantastical science-fictiony animals range in length from a few hundred words to full-sized novellas, by the likes of James Thurber and Howard Fast, Clarke and Farmer. Equally fine, in quite a different way, is Terry Carr's *Into the Unknown* (Thomas Nelson, 192 pp., $6.50). It takes a Terry Carr to think of choosing, for the 12-and-ups, Ballard and Borges. Here also are fine examples of Silverberg, Bradbury, Gunn and Ellison. Carr has a feel for good writing as well as good story, comparable perhaps only to that of Damon Knight, and anything he does can be bought sight unseen, with confidence.

SPEAKING of fine examples of Robert Silverberg, try *Deep Space*, a juvenile antho (Thomas Nelson, 223 pp., $5.95). Silverberg's thumb-rule here is not so much fine writing or even provocative content, but that "sense of wonder" that science fiction is really all about. In a well-balanced table of contents are van Vogt's *Far Centaurus*, one of Harlan Ellison's earlier—or beginning-middle-ending—stories, one of Damon Knight's highly polished tales—and one by the editor which is pure zetz.

Well, there's a sampling of what's going on over there in the children's corner. Would you rather be a kid now than back in the days of the ragged pulps with the hide-from-mom covers?

NOW here's something I do seldom because I don't feel I do it well—clobber somebody. I do not enjoy writing whiplash reviews or reading them either. It's too easy to be clever. Anyone who has leafed through a dictionary of slang knows there are more ways to tear down than to build up and I do not get my jollies by sitting here in safety clobbering bad books by bad writers. I try not to concern myself or you with them. I lend support where I feel support is needed *and* might be effective, and am most pleased when I can share what delights me. The only thing that makes me foam at the mouth is a bad book by a good writer. I guess all this springs from a metamystic

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conviction I have that one is not the possessor of talent, but its custodian.

I am sure that in the critical literature of the future certain of our contemporaries will be regarded as the pillars and pivots of artistic expression, and that among these will be J. G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, and Brian Aldiss. When Aldiss, whose *Barefoot in the Head* fills me with awe, produces such clubfooted whimsy as *The Eighty Minute Hour* (Doubleday, $5.95), I feel robbed, not only of the critical structure I have built up for him, but of the hours and minutes and ergs of mental quanta I have freely given him—time and effort he has earned by past performance and which he now has subtracted from me, for I shall never have them back. I am not objecting to the book's disjointedness, its "specialness"—George Effinger got away with that, for example, exquisitely in *What Entropy Means to Me.* There are, of course, flashes of brilliance in the writing—you can't keep a good talent down—but the whole performance is so personal and non-participatory for the reader that it leaves me with the feeling that the act was both selfish and lonesome. I sit down to some writers as to a banquet. I can appreciate tongue-in-cheek as readily as anyone. But I can't do both through a novel-length menu. So please, Aldiss—not while I'm eating.

TO END on a happier note: look for *Joshua, Son of None,* by Nancy Freedman (Delacorte Press, 291 pp., $7.95.) Let's say that on November 22, 1963, a young doctor was present at a Dallas hospital when they brought in a dying President, and was able to secure a tissue sample, freeze it, clone it and, through the agency of a surrogate mother, bring it to term as a newborn baby. Now if his environment, background, education and all the elements of his biography can be duplicated or closely approximated, so that his personality is forged in the same furnaces as the original, then he isn't dead! He isn't dead!

Nancy Freedman takes this notion in a practiced and skilful hand and drives with it, implacably and with cleanliness and force, leaving you with the conviction that if this could happen it would have to happen this way. She writes man's-angle narrative better than most men, she has done her research and her extrapolation of a near-future America with logic and verisimilitude—all in all, a fine and exciting drama.

Next month is housecleaning time. My backlog has reached the point where I must sidle into my office and even then things fall down. I'll review dozens of books in one word or one sentence, committing enormous injustices—but I'll get them out of here. *'La vista . . .* ★

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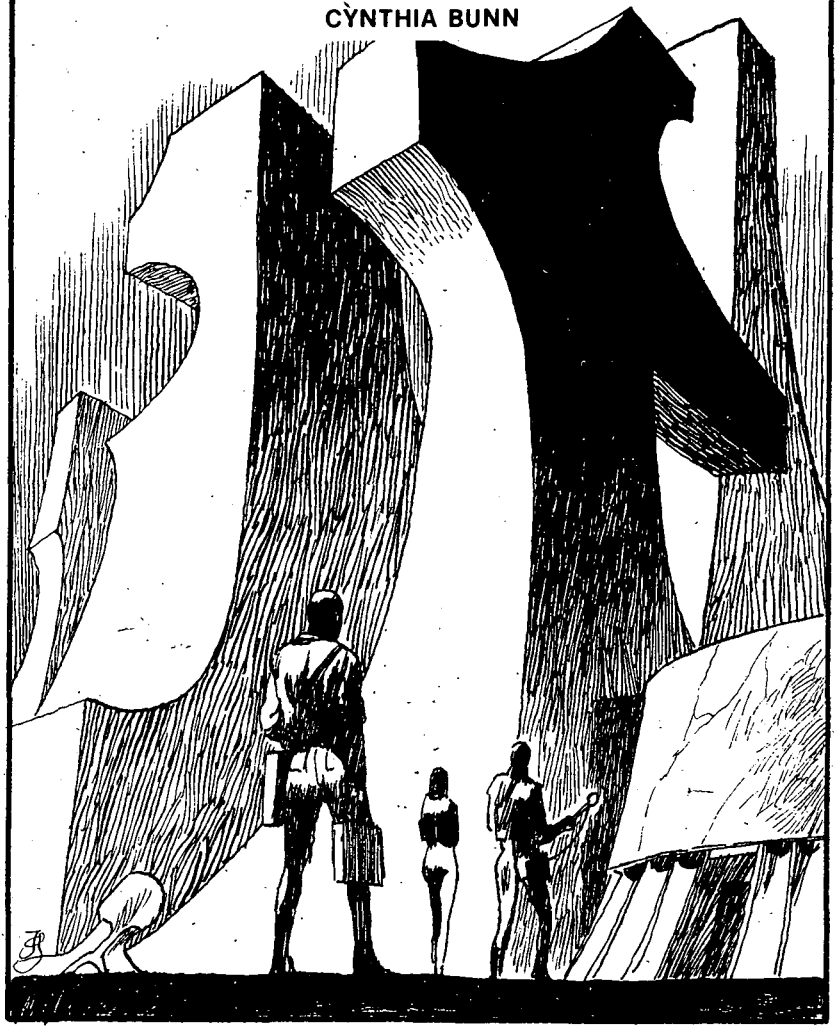
INFIDEL OF FIVE TEMPLES

Man's terrible gods pursued him to an alien planet—one their kind had never trod!

CYNTHIA BUNN



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I

FOOTSTEPS whispered behind him, muffled by the grass.

He turned and it shot past him, so close to his face that he jerked back. It struck the edge of the temple's entrance, rebounded, clattering, and skittered across the floor, coming to rest in a crevice between stones: a pebble.

She who had thrown it stood several meters up the slope, right hand tucked innocently into a pocket, left hand still curled around more pebbles. She had been swimming again—droplets of water fell from her tangled black hair.

Scofield, always near her, was coming around the hill temple, silhouetted against the pale sky.

"You shouldn't have moved," she said. "I might have hit you."

He inclined his head in a mock bow. "Thanks, Margaret. I'll remember that the next time someone throws stones at me."

"Do that. Where are the others?"

"Darby's reworking his notes. Wight's gone for a walk. Mayeux's helping me by developing yesterday's film—"

"—and you're taking care of today's filming. How industrious."

He saw her smile widen, realized his was trying to match it for sarcasm and turned away.

"Hello, Schneider."

A nod. "Scofield. You two enjoy your swim?"

Margaret's laughter answered. Then: "If you see Wight, tell him I'll be inside—that I want to talk to him again about Sumer."

When the faint echoes of her footsteps were gone, Schneider returned the camera to its case, looked up at the overhanging roof, the details of its construction now recorded for experts who would never have to leave their offices. Not glancing at Scofield, he said, "I thought one of the reasons for our coming out here was to avoid the scholarly atmosphere of the ship. Yet between Guevara and Wight—"

"It's a different thing."

"Yeah. Dead myth, instead of a review of new information that might prove useful. Not exactly—"

"I'm going to look for Wight."

Schneider sat down on the grass and lit a cigarette as he watched the other man walking off down the valley. Scofield hadn't been willing to listen to criticism of Margaret, but then what had Schneider expected?

A HALF-HOUR later he was sitting in the aircar, sketching, wishing the radio worked and he could hear a ship voice, when the sound of conversation made him look up from the paper.

Wight was barefoot, his feet caked with mud and dust, boots clutched in one hand. Next to him was Scofield, walking slowly but

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looking tense and impatient.

"Schneider," Wight called, "are you going to join us in the temple?"

"No."

"You should. All this is of great educational value."

"So I've heard."

"What are you working on?"

Wight came to lean over the side of the aircar, myopic eyes squinting as he examined the sketch.

It was a raw but precise beginning. Schneider had sketched in the wall of the largest temple, next to which the aircar rested, and the outlines of the other three temples in the valley: the outward curving walls, the multifaceted domes that seemed to float above, barely touching. The hill temple wasn't pictured—it was on the other side of the large temple and what he couldn't see he wouldn't add to a sketch.

"Excellent. You're as careful an artist as you are a photographer."

A suggestion of mockery ran through the comment. Schneider ignored it—many of Wight's remarks were double-edged.

Scofield called, "Wight, aren't you coming in?"

He was standing in the temple entrance, even his size dwarfed by the massive opening. Not a door, it was a floor-to-ceiling gap in the wall. Nothing as inharmonious as a door marred the lines of the temples.

"In a few minutes," Wight said. "Sumer hasn't been forgotten yet—" Scofield disappeared—"and won't be for a while. Schneider, you have true talent for copying the physical world."

"Thank you." The words held dual meaning again, but why give Wight the satisfaction of reacting to it?

He toyed with the edges of the notebook. More sketches were there, including portraits, but he rarely showed the last to their subjects. Once he had done so, but people never recognized themselves—sometimes they even failed to identify others. He didn't understand it—he'd compared his work to photographs and the likenesses were exact.

"Wight?"

"Mm?"

"I was thinking a while ago that maybe this isn't a better way to spend time than staying at the ship, waiting for the great and glorious experts to get here from Earth." Wight's smile curved into a grin—he had as little respect for carefully nurtured reputations as anyone. "I mean, Margaret's going over everything she knows of Earth mythology—"

"And everything I know as well?" A minor joke—Wight had given up the study of dead languages and cultures in middle-age for exo-archeology. Margaret didn't have the questions needed to request even a small fraction of the man's knowledge.

"Yeah. It's not exactly the sort of

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convivial atmosphere this group was supposed to generate. I said something to Scofield about it, hoping he'd talk to Margaret, but he didn't want to listen."

Wight seemed amused. "Did you expect him to?"

"I don't know. Maybe. After all, I'm the only reason you're out here. The site had to be photographed."

Wight's smile had vanished. "Don't be an ass, Schneider. We didn't volunteer to come out here because we wanted to keep you company any more than you came because of dedication to your work. None of us wanted to sit around the ship."

Schneider opened his mouth to object, but said instead, "Do you think they've gotten into make-work projects yet, back at the ship?"

"I don't want to think about it. How they waste their time is none of my business."

"But for the grace of God—and me—you might be back there with them now."

"Damn you—" but Wight was chuckling—"and your ego. I'm surprised you didn't ask for only female volunteers for a harem."

"If it had occurred to me I would have."

"No. They'd never have let you off the ship. But it's a shame that only one woman wanted to come out here."

"And that she brought her pet bodyguard along."

"Yes. Well, I have to go in or Margaret will send her pet to retrieve me. See you later."

"Yeah."

WITH Wight gone Schneider's restlessness was back. He put the sketchbook aside.

Wight and Scofield would be talking now inside the temple, but no sound reached out here. The corridor wound three times before it opened onto a small, square room. The sanctum, Margaret had decided.

Across the valley the slanting afternoon light set off the facets of the temple roofs. Wight had speculated that once the stone had been polished or covered with a lacquer. The domes would have glittered blindingly. But the truth would remain a speculation—no trace of polish was left. Had it existed it would have eroded away—how long ago? Centuries? Millennia? No artifacts remained in the temples or around them, no debris—it was as though the buildings had been deliberately abandoned, swept clean to leave no evidence of their builders but the strong curving lines of the walls and the low wide benches that filled the sanctums.

No evidence here, but in the town the expedition had first discovered near the ship . . .

He pushed the nagging thought away. It was bad enough to stay here with a pretense of useful work,

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knowing that a large town only partially destroyed by fire needed to be explored, mapped, to have its artifacts typed and classified. It would be worse to be one of the hundred-plus waiting in the ship, with that valuable site only a few kilometers away. While back on Earth men who had long ago established themselves as authorities in the field would be setting up their own expeditions and arranging the publicity that would add another layer of fame to their reputations . . .

He automatically conceded that the custom was unfair, but the injustice had long ceased to rankle. Only for a few, those whose work was a testimony to their ambition, would the delay be a torture. But those few always spread their misery to the rest.

He stretched and leaned back, appreciating the silence.

"HELLO, Darby."

"Hello."

Why had Darby come here?

Looking down at the lined, somber face, Schneider wondered if he should have continued sketching and ignored the man's arrival. But it would be rude now not to attempt conversation.

"Working on your notes?"

Darby nodded. "I'd like to give this expedition some type of order. We've been here two weeks and only you have been working. And there's much to be done. For example, we could be measuring the temples, the outside walls, the sizes of the benches, et cetera. We should set up a scale for comparison. Right?"

"Yeah." At least Darby now said "temple."

Darby was a purist—worse, an anachronistic purist who should have been born on Earth several centuries before. Alone in the group, he'd insisted on not inferring the mental templates of Earth cultures from alien structures. To him the temples were buildings of unknown function until more evidence was found. But now—

Darby was slipping.

"What else?" Schneider asked.

"It's just an idea now, but I think we should consider an excavation of the tell."

"What tell?"

"Here." An index finger stabbed downward.

"The hill?"

"It's too perfectly round. And this is the only temple not on the valley floor."

Could there be earlier structures buried beneath the hill temple? Schneider dismissed the possibility. Darby's wishful thinking was contagious.

"We weren't sent out here to excavate. We have no tools."

"No. We don't even have equipment for the most elementary geophysical testing," Darby complained.

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"Obviously we're not supposed to start an excavation," Schneider continued. This line of reasoning was redundant, simplistic, childish—Darby might understand it. "When we get back to the ship the others will hear your theory about the tell and maybe then they'll give you permission to began an excavation."

"They'll give it to someone else."

Schneider didn't object. That hypocrisy was too much for him. He mumbled "See you later—" and walked away.

A MONTH of boredom past, a month remaining. Schneider left the temple for a walk. The night was cool around him.

Wight was sitting in the aircar, dictating notes into a recorder. Another popular story of archeologists-at-work, intended for Earthbound escapists. Schneider halted a few meters away, making no sound, waiting for the older man to finish. Minutes dragged past—then Wight paused for a moment, spoke a final sentence and shut off the recorder.

"Is Margaret looking for me again?"

"No."

"Then she isn't holding forth on the mysteries of the past."

"She has her captive audience again. I believe she has an adequate repertory now. Your assistance is no longer needed."

Wight shrugged. "I was only a dispensable, minor character in her little drama anyway."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Why should it? It was becoming extremely boring."

"Not the mythology. Margaret's obsession with it."

"Most people have obsessions. Darby's is excavating; mine, the past in general. And Mayeux is an addict of escapism. Drugs, sex, music, drama—any vehicle of escape will do. Now there is an interesting obsession for you to observe. And there's your obsession, Schneider. Watching the rest of us. Margaret, who wants to be a goddess. Scofield, who—"

"I know."

"—wants Margaret and has her. He also derives a great deal of pleasure from your jealousy. If Margaret were trying to make you feel envy you might have a chance with her. But she doesn't give a damn about you."

Silence.

"No comments, Schneider?"

Stillness.

"All right. I'm through making speeches. Now I have a question. What are you doing out here with the rest of us and our private obsessions?"

"I have as many degrees in archeology as any of you, as well as being the best photographer—"

"Don't be defensive. I know that. So do all the others, here and on the ship. Which stopped none of them from referring to you as a

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photographer because, despite the degrees, that's all you are. You have no true interest in the past. No more than a layman's interest, anyway."

"True interest? Mine is a more valid interst than yours, Wight. When I was studying on Earth I had a chance to see the ruins of all the grand, dead civilizations you love. I was more dissatisfied than impressed. It took years before I realized that I was unhappy because too many archeologists had been there before me. I couldn't see the ruins clearly. The buildings were distorted by all the layers of interpretation and opinion, everything that I'd heard or read about them. Did you ever feel, at one of those Earth sites, that a shrine should've been built to the archeologists?"

A smile was twitching the stubborn edges of Wight's mouth. Schneider took a breath and hurried to conclude: "I wanted to see what had not yet been tainted by another man's interpretation. You can't do that on Earth."

The smile still fought to surface. Wight ended it with a cough, then said, "You surprise me. You're a romantic. *Tainted* ruins. I've never heard of an archeologist searching for innocence, but that seems to be the only way to describe you. Practically lusting after innocence. Except in Margaret's case, of course."

"Perhaps, Wight—" Schneider's voice was steady—"you should consider your own motives. Yours and Darby's and Margaret's. What have you done but bring the myths of Earth to another planet? What are you trying to do but apply them to a society that probably had nothing in common with the Sumerians, or the Israelites?"

The shadowy smile again. Wight covered it with his hand, fingers carefully stroking his mustache. "I'll consider it. Now, Schneider, if you'll excuse me, I have work—"

II

SCHNEIDER gave up trying to stifle a yawn. With luck, Margaret wouldn't notice. Neither would Scofield, who had been asleep the past hour. And Wight was playing back his notes. To Schneider, at the opposite end of the bench, the sound was a low murmur, nearly drowned out by Margaret's voice.

He looked at the pipe and the dwindling supply of hashish Mayeux had left. It would be nice to take some, just a small amount. Mayeux would return in a moment. Schneider was searching through his pockets for something to wrap the hash in when Mayeux burst into the sanctum.

"An aircar!"

Before the echoes had quit he was gone again.

Scofield had jerked awake at the shout—he was a half-step behind

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Schneider as they left the sanctum, scrambling and slipping in the darkness.

Once outside, they saw Mayeux standing halfway up the slope to the hill temple, head tilted back as he watched the silver dart-shape glide over the temples, heading south, out over the inland sea.

Mayeux stared down at them, bewilderment clear on his face.

Was there another expedition on the planet? Or was the ship scouting the temple site?

Scofield was shaking his head in confusion.

Wight had come out of the temple but was ignoring them, his gaze fixed on the north side of the building, where their own aircar should have been.

"Darby."

"What?" Scofield whirled, froze when he saw the vacant patch of flattened grass.

"He's crazy," Margaret said. "Why should he take the aircar up?"

"Photography."

"Of the sea?"

Then the high whispering sound was back. The aircar slowed, made a clumsy turn and dropped to the ground within centimeters of the temple wall.

Wight reached it first. He pushed Darby away from the controls, leaned over and stared at the gauges. "The fuel," he muttered.

Scofield reached around Wight and grabbed Darby by the shoulder. "How long were you up there?"

"I don't know."

"How much fuel is left, Wight?"

"Not enough to get us back to the ship. And the radio's out."

Schneider heard a hissing sound and turned to see Margaret standing, fists clenched. He could sense a lynch-mob attitude growing. Worried, he pulled Darby free of Scofield's grasp. His eyes moved across the hostile faces, came to rest on Wight, who could be reasoned with.

"We don't have to worry. If we don't return in three weeks they'll send an aircar out after us."

After a moment Wight nodded. He went over to Margaret, whispered to her, then took her arm and led her back to the temple. A moment later Scofield followed.

Schneider removed the camera from its niche in the bottom of the aircar. He fingered the release and two film cartridges rolled out onto his palm. He might as well destroy them. Darby had been flying at too high an altitude for the temples to be photographed properly and his flight had picked up too much of the surrounding land.

"Why, Darby? Did you think you were going to replace me as photographer?"

"I had an idea . . . Schneider, will you develop the film for me?"

"It won't be worth developing."

"Sure it will. The sunlight was at the best angle. The camera should

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have picked up shadow marks as well as crop marks. If there once were any roads here—or buried ruins—they'll show up on the film." He beamed. "It should make things much easier for the experts when they arrive. They'll know where to begin their excavations."

Mayeux's mouth had dropped open as he listened. Now it snapped shut. He bent down and ripped a clump of grass from the soil.

"Look, Darby. The roots are only a few centimeters long. Even ten centimeters of topsoil over a paved road would be enough for this grass to grow there as thickly as anywhere else. So you can't expect crop marks. And shadow marks? From up there?" He gestured toward the hill temple. "We can look out in the morning or afternoon and spot any irregularities on the valley surface."

Darby shook his head. "You'll see—after the film's developed."

"Oh, hell. What's the use? We're stuck here now until they come to get us—and all because you expected crop marks." Mayeux began to search his pockets.

"Inside," Schneider reminded him.

"Yeah. Do you want to join me, Schneider? If we smoke long enough this is going to seem trivial, maybe even funny."

"Sure." He pocketed the cartridges and followed Mayeux into the temple.

Wight was standing just inside the temple entrance, watching the first minutes of a shower. Rain fell soundlessly on the roof and rolled off in a heavy curtain.

Schneider walked to stand near him and looked out across the valley. The rain blurred the three smaller temples, obscuring the sharply chiseled stone, the facets of the domes. He could almost see them as mushrooms, gray-white against the green, sheltered by the hills that rimmed the peninsula, coming to a point a quarter of a kilometer behind him.

"I covered the aircar," Wight said.

Schneider nodded.

"What's that you're holding? Are those the lights?"

Schneider stared down at the four hour-glass shaped objects he gripped. Their reflecting surfaces were opaque. "They've been replaced."

"Aren't they working?" Wight took one and twisted the control that circled the lamp's waist. He winced at the glare. "Why would they want to replace them?"

"Margaret—" this wouldn't be easy—"wanted torches instead of artificial light, so Scofield cut some branches from that grove at the base of the peninsula—"

"Oh, God. Schneider, I heard them say something about it; but I warned them not to. I didn't think they'd be so stupid."

He started down the corridor.

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Schneider moved to block his path.

"You can't reason with Scofield—and I wouldn't start a fight."

"No." Wight rubbed a hand across his forehead, sighed. "Torches. Ashes and coals all over the floor. The carbon-fourteen people will want to run tests and we'll have to explain. We can try to clean away the mess, but we'll never get all of it."

"Is that what worries you? Explaining to the others that we were using torches inside a temple because Margaret wanted to play at being a goddess or a priestess for a while?"

"Doesn't it worry you at all?"

"Yes. But I half expected it. Did you really think that we could indulge our fantasies out here, then return to the ship and act as if nothing unusual had been done?"

Wight didn't answer.

THE next evening it was still raining. Schneider sketched the blurred hills and temples, his boots sinking deep into soggy ground, rain beating down steadily. Then a breeze from the north bent the curtain of water inward and he retreated to the sanctum.

He sat on the first bench, near Mayeux. Behind him were Scofield and Wight. At the back of the room, Darby had straddled a bench and was examining a foam-lined metal camera casing. Schneider wondered why he had it—the camera was in the aircar.

Margaret stood before them. She spoke without interruption, confirming Schneider's suspicion that she needed no response from her audience. She stood motionless. Each of the many torches was a reflected pinpoint of light in her eyes and a larger-than-life shadow posed at her back. Torchlight flattered her.

She spoke of the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* and it was Kali, not Rudra, who turned the Brahma-wheel, creating worlds, destroying them at the end of time. Her speech led them through the labyrinths of Crete to confront, not the Minotaur, but Queen Pasiphae-become-Medusa . . .

Schneider ceased to listen. Her conversations with Wight had been straight narrations of myth. This was a deliberate scrambling, a hybrid whose wrongness lay uneasily on his nerves.

He looked around at the others.

Wight was listening complacently. If Margaret's distortions bothered him his face did not show it.

Scofield, sprawled across the bench, appeared to be fighting drowsiness and losing. Eyes half-closed, he seemed unaware of anyone. Then Schneider noticed that every time Margaret spoke of the consorts of the ancient goddesses, a smile flickered across Scofield's face.

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Darby was twisting the camera casing, trying to wrench it out of shape, failing, trying again. Why?

Mayeux was smoking peacefully. As Schneider watched he turned a cat-curious face. Then he held out the pipe, but Schneider shook his head in refusal. Mayeux shrugged and returned the pipe to his mouth.

Schneider still watched: Mayeux also was flattered by the torchlight. Which was not surprising—he and Margaret looked alike, could have been brother and sister. Almost identical in height and bone structure, features similar, both with black hair and blue-green eyes. Both with skin drawn so tightly over the bone that white ridges could sometimes be glimpsed through the tan. But whereas with Margaret that bone structure suggested a tensile strength, in Mayeux it was a fragility. His profile was a chiseled perfection haloed by the torchlight.

Schneider looked around. For the first time he noticed that Scofield's eyes were focused on Mayeux.

Margaret had stopped talking. She stood with eyes closed, either tired and quitting, or planning the next part of her monologue. Either way, Schneider was grateful for the silence.

And then Mayeux began to sing.

Margaret's eyes snapped open with the first notes. They fastened on Mayeux, but he was oblivious to her anger.

Schneider held his breath.

Mayeux continued to sing.

Finally realizing that he wasn't going to stop, Margaret launched into her speech again.

Schneider looked down, fighting the first tremors of laughter. When he had quelled them he again paid attention to what Margaret was saying.

". . . and despite their loss of authority, there was a partial conconservation of the ancient mythos . . ."

He raised an eyebrow in inquiry at Wight.

"Neolithic matriarchies," Wight explained.

Schneider nodded, let his eyes close, willed himself to fall asleep. Around him, tenor *a cappella* notes ranged through anger-clipped words.

III

DARK spots that were flaws in the stone swarmed antlike up the walls, chased by predatory torchlight.

Even Schneider's hallucinations were cliches.

He tried to expel the vision. Mayeux's hand touched his and he relinquished the hash pipe, shook his head, opened his eyes. The spots held steady, but for how long?

The pipe was offered again, Mayeux's hand resting a few seconds in Schneider's, an intimacy

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that made Schneider nervous. But when there was nothing more to object to than a too-long touching of hands, he could not act offended. He took the pipe and inhaled deeply.

Nothing.

The hash pipe had perversely gone out.

Mayeux plucked it from his hand. Numb, Schneider lay back, stretched his legs, contemplated the sanctum wall.

"I'm worried about Margaret," he said and listened to his distant voice roaring on long after the thought had ended.

"Yes?" Clouds of smoke formed trellises in front of Mayeux's face. Memories, unbidden, brought to Schneider the folk song Mayeux had sung the week before by torchlight, with Scofield staring at him and Margaret angry. Schneider's mind played with the notes, amplifying, echoing, rearranging. In his memory a helix of pure sound curved upward, glorifying—what? No matter—the feeling was all.

"Why are you worried about Margaret?" Mayeux asked.

"She's blending into the myth-figures she talks about." Schneider frowned, able to concentrate with the return of reality. "Lilith, Kali, Medusa, Isis, Astarte—she's portraying a schizoid reincarnation of them all, with an emphasis on the bloodthirsty element."

"Countess Dracula." Mayeux giggled.

Silence, then footsteps on stone and Scofield came toward them.

"Countess who?" Scofield asked.

The name sounded familiar to Schneider, but the associations slipped away as his mind reached for them.

"Vampire," Mayeux replied.

Schneider free-associated the word, coming up with medieval nightmare images.

"Gothic castles," Mayeux added.

Scofield corrected: "Gothic romance, not architecture."

Schneider nodded and gave up trying to connect bats with flying butresses. It hadn't seemed right anyway.

A WEEK before the group was to return to the ship Margaret fell to silence, worry and occasional whispered comments about The Others, of whom she spoke in awe . . .

A week, and Mayeux no longer asked others if they wished to share his remaining tiny supply of hashish . . .

A week, and when Scofield spoke to Schneider at all it was with confidence that the people on the ship would come after them promptly . . .

A week, and Wight's views exactly opposed Scofield's . . .

A week, and Darby had been practically living in the hill temple for days . . .

Schneider went up to investigate. He found a scar in the soil, two

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meters wide, ten meters long, starting at the temple wall and pointing toward the sea. Darby tended that wound carefully, the camera casing in his hands removing the soil, millimeter by millimeter.

Schneider watched and waited for Darby to notice him and explain—watched, without expecting an explanation—and finally left. He wouldn't tell the other four. They would discover the trench soon enough.

"I've been considering what you said about layers of interpretation and tainted ruins."

It was the last evening before the return date. The air was cool and misty. Despite the chill Schneider preferred being outside to the smoky ritual in the sanctum. He twisted around, eyes seeking Wight. There, against the wall, his light clothes blending with the stone, his sun-blackened face obscured by the fog and dusk.

"What—" Schneider began, stopping as he recalled the conversation of a month before. "Well?"

"Well what?" The wraith laughed and moved toward him, solidifying as it neared.

"You're not attending the lecture this evening?"

Wight shook his head. "As I was saying—I've thought about your remarks a great deal. Look at the hill temple and tell me what you see."

Psychological games now? Schneider almost laughed, but Wight's voice had been serious, almost solemn. He looked.

The temple had become Rorschach blot.

Ears sensitized by concentration he imagined he could hear both Darby busily scraping away at the trench and voices from the temple behind him. But neither should be audible here—all he could really be hearing was Wight's breathing and his own.

He glanced away from the hill. Wight's eyes met his, locked, requested an answer.

"I don't know what you expected me to see. Barring the fact that it looks very impressive in this light—it's just a temple. Merely a building."

"Merely a building." The words were pronounced slowly, as though Wight were savoring them, wondering at them. "Not even an intimation of this culture's sense of whatever deities were worshipped?"

"I don't worship the supernatural. I prefer not to be deceived by mists or mysticism." He was about to congratulate himself on the phrase, but Wight's somber expression hadn't changed, so he continued: "I can see things more clearly."

"You're blind, Schneider." And in a moment he was gone, swallowed by the fog as he walked away.

Four days later loneliness sent Schneider up to the hill temple. All but he and Darby had with-

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drawn into fantasy, becoming autistic strangers who rarely left the sanctum.

He stood at the edge of the trench, now a meter deep. Mounds of damp clay soil covered the uprooted grass and topsoil. Darby glanced up once, wiped a hand across his forehead, leaving red-brown streaks, then returned to digging.

Schneider stood there more than a quarter of an hour, occasionally leaning down to pick up a clod, mold it into a pyramid, crumble it again.

Finally Darby set the mud-encrusted casing aside, leaned against the side of the trench, managed a weary smile. "Did you ever hear of Austen Henry Layard?" he asked.

"The name sounds familiar."

"I've always envied," Darby went on, "his discovery of the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Those nineteenth-century Englishmen—" He shook his head. "That was the time for an archeologist to live."

Schneider sat down on the grass. He would listen.

THE next morning and afternoon passed slowly. Schneider sat in the aircar, sketched and saw no one. In midafternoon he entered the temple.

Once, twice around and he still heard nothing.

Three times and the blackness grayed.

Mayeux was sitting in the corridor, unlit hash pipe cradled in his left hand. His gaze was fastened on it.

"Hello, Schneider."

"Hello, Mayeux. Are the others—"

Mayeux waved the pipe in the direction of the sanctum. "In there."

Schneider listened for voices coming from the sanctum. None.

Mayeux craned his neck around, stared up at Schneider for a moment, said, "Margaret's praying. Or meditating. I'm not sure what she calls it."

Then he turned his attention back to the pipe. Relighting it, he added: "Praying for guidance, I believe. Scofield's asleep. So's Wight."

Schneider stepped over Mayeux's outstretched legs, moved quietly to the sanctum entrance.

Margaret was on her knees, her back to him.

Scofield was asleep, as Mayeux had said, but Wight wasn't. He noticed Schneider and smiled.

Schneider turned and went back to Mayeux.

"Kneeling?"

Mayeux shrugged.

"Wight's awake. And watching."

Mayeux glanced at him curiously. "He finds you interesting," Mayeux remarked.

"How so?"

"He told me you don't—" Mayeux waved the pipe as though trying to sketch an answer he couldn't phrase—"recognize what

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is basic. What is necessary."

"What the hell did he mean by that?"

"Ask Wight."

"He didn't tell you?"

Blank eyes met his.

Ask Wight? Now? Walk into the sanctum and disturb that quiet . . .

No. There would be another time.

"WIGHT."

Hours had dragged the afternoon through dusk and into night. Schneider had waited in the aircar for Wight to leave the temple.

"Yes."

"What is it that is basic that I don't recognize?"

"What was that, Schneider?" Wight took his recorder from the aircar's storage compartment.

Schneider repeated.

"Who told you I said that?"

"Mayeux. But that was all he told me."

"And you want an explanation—"

"Yes."

"—of what I tried to tell you before and failed to make you understand?"

"Yes."

"Migod, Schneider. I tried to communicate something subtle and complex in the most elementary way possible and you didn't comprehend. We're down to the most basic words of a language and now you want me to take the words apart and explain what the letters mean."

"I'm sure that if anyone could do it, Wight, you—"

"The sycophant's costume does not fit you."

"I'm sorry."

"Of course. All right. I'll go through the argument once more. I should have realized when you looked at the hill temple that you weren't viewing it correctly."

"Because I saw it as a building, nothing more?"

"I should have realized that perhaps that was the only way you could see it. But let's not bother with that now. Since you're blind, you must settle for mere words. To you a building is a building, a stone, a stone—"

"I'm waiting for the explanation, whenever you want to start."

Wight sighed melodramatically. "I am explaining, so listen. To you objects are their simple physical selves, which makes you ideal as a photographer in this situation. But if you tried to become a painter, say, or even to capture a mood or an idea in a photograph, you'd fail. You don't like the so-called layers of interpretation, but it's normal for homo sapiens to invest physical objects with meaning. Only with that extra dimension does the object become fully real.

"I misjudged you badly when I called you a romantic. You suffer from a lack of imagination, not an

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excess. I misinterpreted your comment that the ruins on Earth are tainted. Or perhaps you used the wrong word. Interpretations to you are superfluous."

"That's what I told you."

"Damn it, you're missing the point again. The reaction of each of us to these temples is necessary—it's basic—it's not some frivolous and irrelevant fantasy. Since we don't know what this area signified to its builders, we have a *tabula rasa*. We construct meanings."

"That shouldn't be necessary."

Wight shook his head. "You'll never understand. So please stop asking me for explanations. I'm beginning to feel responsible for your blindness—and I don't want that."

AT DAWN Schneider went up to the hill temple. The inland sea was a smooth dull gray, a sheet of metal laid out from the shore.

Scraping noises interrupted his reverie. Darby was already up, digging with one hand while the other stifled yawns.

"Good morning."

"Morning. I see you like to get up early, too."

"Not always—just this morning."

"I think," Darby said, "that I may be able to show you something today."

"You've found some artifacts?"

"No."

"A different type of soil?"

"Not yet."

"Then what?"

"A feeling, Schneider. A very strong feeling."

"You're working on intuition?"

"It's been done before. Successfully, too."

"Darby—" Schneider's exasperation was almost a physical pain. If there had been a find here it could have represented a way to pull the others out of their fantasy worlds.

He left Darby, who didn't look up.

MAYEUX came out of the temple later in the morning. Rubbing bloodshot eyes, he fixed a cup of coffee. When he'd drained it, Schneider asked, "Is Margaret still at it?"

"I suppose so. I heard her talking a couple of times during the night, though."

"What did she say?"

"I couldn't tell. She was crying, too. I don't know what she thinks she'll accomplish. Pray—and God will send a rescue team? Pray—and the fuel tank will be refilled? I've seen other religious zealots who believed in miracles, but to cry when one doesn't happen—"

"Maybe her knees hurt."

"Don't be such a sonofabitch. She's not bothering you." Mayeux fixed another cup of coffee and took it into the temple.

Schneider leaned against the aircar, his fingers drumming on its

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metal shell. Just as the noise was becoming an irritant, he saw Mayeux standing in the temple entrance, gesturing to him.

IV

"MARGARET told Scofield she wants to talk to us," Mayeux said as they hurried along the corridor.

"Told Scofield?"

"She won't talk to anyone else yet."

"What about Darby?"

"What about him?"

"Never mind."

They were at the entrance of the sanctum. Schneider saw Wight sitting on the front bench, arms folded across his chest. Margaret was talking to Scofield, who was lighting a new set of torches from the stack of branches in the corner.

Margaret.

Her face was ashen under a film of sweat—her eyes were swollen and red. For the first time Schneider pitied her. She might be insane and a threat to the sanity of the others, but her madness was taking its greatest toll of her.

"Margaret—"

He reached out a hand but before it touched her she turned to look directly at him. No. Into him. Through him. He fell back under that gaze.

"The Others haven't yet come for us?"

"No," he said quietly.

"I was right, then. They're angry."

She went over to Wight and repeated, "I was right."

He nodded, smiling, mocking her. Schneider expected her to react with fury.

Instead, almost wistfully: "They're angry."

"Yes, they're angry."

Her eyelids fell. She nodded a few times, acknowledging his agreement. Then she looked at Mayeux. Schneider waited for her to repeat the incantation. He might have to slap her to free her from the delusion.

Mayeux met her gaze for a moment, then reached into a pocket for his pipe, filled and lighted it and walked to the back of the room. He sat down on the last bench.

"Margaret doesn't like him," Scofield murmured.

Margaret had turned back to them. She was frowning.

"So what if they're angry?" Schneider said. "They'll come after us anyway."

"No."

"Yes, Margaret."

"They're angry and they have to be appeased."

He checked his response. Appeased? A new element to her madness. "How?"

There was no answer. He stared past her at Wight, who had switched on the recorder. Schneider pictured the writer/archeologist using

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all this in some future dissertation, article or book. The thought infuriated him. It was time to put an end to the little drama.

"Aren't your prayers working, Margaret? Isn't your make-believe world congenial any more?"

"Leave her alone," Scofield said, but for the moment he could be ignored. Margaret's hands were clasped tightly, knuckles showing whitely through the skin.

"Your prayers don't work, Margaret."

She nodded. There was a minute's silence before she said, "The prayers are not enough."

"What, then?"

"A sacrifice."

"That's great. That's perfect, Margaret. Wight's recorded that, so when we get back to the ship you'll be put under sedation until you can be taken to a hospital."

"We won't get back to the ship without a sacrifice." Her voice was patient but stubborn.

"Is that so?" He stepped closer to her and tilted her head back until she was staring directly at him. "And you don't even look insane."

Her right hand lashed across his face, rough nails scratching. Reflexively, he slapped her.

"Schneider." Wight was shaking his head.

Scofield was backing toward the corner.

"That was a mistake," Wight said.

"Was it?"

"Yes." Scofield answered. He watched Schneider while he reached back toward the stack of branches.

"WAIT a minute. Wight, you know I hit her only to snap her out of it. Scofield, you realize that, don't you? Help me explain to him. Wight. Mayeux—"

Mayeux's eyes were glazed. He jerked when he heard his name, then settled back against the wall. The pipe still in his mouth, he began to sing, the words mumbled and distorted.

"Are you out of your mind, too?"

Schneider's eyes moved from Mayeux to Wight, who hadn't left the bench, then to Scofield, whose right hand was curled around a heavy branch, which had just metamorphosed into a crude but usable club.

"Wight?"

"I tried to warn you to conform, Schneider, but you never listened. Now—" He shrugged, rubbed his hands together, one over the other. A moment later, as if answering Schneider's bewilderment, he mumbled a few words. Schneider caught only one clearly, the rest vaguely.

"Pilot? Why are you talking about a pilot now? Help me—talk to Scofield, for God's sake!"

"Deaf, as well as blind? And in a similar way. You hear the sound but miss the words."

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"You're all insane." Schneider took a step backward, another, yet another, then turned and ran. He could hear Scofield following.

He burst out of the temple.

Pilot . . .

Of course. The aircar—the rest of what Wight had mumbled so indistinctly still made no sense. But the aircar did.

Schneider slowed, sliding across the grass, halted and looked back at the aircar. Scofield was framed by the temple entrance. He was much closer to the machine than Schneider.

Warily Schneider started on a semicircular path around Scofield. He had taken five steps when Scofield left the temple, carelessly swinging the club.

Schneider wheeled to run up the hill.

Near the summit he fell. He caught a glimpse of Scofield, climbing quickly, clutched at the grass and lurched to his feet. The hill temple was only a few meters before him, then beside him, then behind him as he neared the trench.

Darby was there, hands cradling a large white stone.

"Darby—"

The excavator looked up and smiled. "Look, Schneider—a Jericho skull! The first artifact we've found—and so close to its Earth counterpart—" His fingers ran over his find, stroking gently.

As mad as the rest.

Schneider slid into the trench. Darby, clasping the featureless rock, backed away.

"You have to be careful with this," he said. "It's a skull. It's fragile."

Schneider disregarded him, scanning the trench for the camera casing. It would serve as a weapon. He spotted it at the other end of the trench, too far away to reach.

Footsteps behind him, muffled by the grass.

"Give me the skull."

Schneider lunged forward. Then darkness caught him, falling at the edge of a club.

THE cold brought him back to consciousness—that, and the pressure against the back of his neck. He jerked away from it. The movement brought pain and he moaned.

"Schneider?"

The voice was unfamiliar. He tried craning his neck to look at the speaker, but the agony was too great. He waited for it to subside before moving again. Meanwhile he could see nothing but the cover of an aircar's seat on which he was lying face down.

"Who are you?" he managed to ask. The words took an effort—his throat was dry and rough and every movement of his mouth as he spoke caused more pain.

"Pam Durrell." The voice sounded amused by the question. "I've only met you once, so you might not

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recognize the name."

He did, though he couldn't remember the person to whom the name belonged. Risking the hurt again, he asked, "My neck—what's wrong?"

"You have a bruise. Maybe even a fracture, though I don't think so. We didn't bring a doctor when we came out here. We had no idea you'd be fighting each other."

"Fighting?"

"Wight told us all about the rivalry between you and Scofield. Someone at the ship should've guessed that with only one woman out here, especially Mar—" Her voice cut off in embarrassment.

"Wight told you that?"

"Uh-huh. He was sorry they had to tie you up like that, but they were afraid you'd try to kill Scofield if you weren't restrained. When we got here they had your arms and legs bound to a stone bench."

Schneider listened with detachment. His companions had been ingenious, letting a bench substitute for a sacrificial altar. Given more time, they would have found a religious use for Scofield's pocketknife.

"Can I get up? Will it hurt my neck?"

"I don't know—you'll just have to try it. If you're careful and don't jerk your neck—there. That's it. How do you feel?"

"No worse than before." He twisted his torso until he could see the woman, who was still holding the damp cloth she'd pressed against his neck. She was young, with short brown hair. He remembered seeing her on the ship, but nothing more about her. "You people waited long enough before coming after us."

"We didn't expect to have to rescue you. In fact, it's going to cut into our working time if one of us has to fly you back to the ship."

"You came out here to work?" he asked, but already he was twisting around, surveying the aircar. It was almost twice the size of the aircar that had brought him out two months earlier and was heavily laden with equipment. Even photographic equipment, he noted.

"That's right."

"Where are the others?"

"You mean your group? Waiting near one of the buildings while we look for Mayeux."

"Everyone else—Darby?"

"We found him. Digging a trench, of all things. Wight said you had a lot of trouble with him."

"Wight said," Schneider echoed. "Wight must have been very busy explaining."

She was staring at him curiously. "We had to know what was going on. The trench, the torches you used after Darby went crazy and smashed the lights—"

So Wight had come up with an explanation for everything unusual that had occurred. It would be up to Schneider to refute Wight's story—Margaret and Scofield

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would, of course, back Wight. Mayeux apparently wanted no part of any of this and no one would believe Darby.

He studied the girl sitting beside him. She wasn't one of the ship's administrators. If he told his story now she might not know how to handle the situation. It would be better to wait until he got back to the ship to explain what had really happened.

Schneider tried twisting around to look back at the temples, finally stood and turned around in the aircar. Scofield, Margaret, Wight and Darby were sitting in a silent group near the entrance of the largest temple. As Schneider watched, Wight glanced up, said something to the others, then stood and walked toward Schneider.

Wight stopped at the side of the aircar and smiled up as though none of the morning's events had happened.

"I'm glad you're not hurt badly," Wight said. "Pam was afraid you might have a fracture or a concussion, but I told her Scofield hadn't hit you that hard."

"You told her about everything, didn't you?" Schneider muttered.

Wight's smile didn't change as he looked past Schneider at Pam and said, "Maybe now that your patient is conscious you can finish telling me about the findings in the town. You see, Schneider, the rest of the expedition didn't stay in the ship. They've been working the past six weeks."

Schneider turned to look at the woman. The movement caused a flash of pain. "Is that true?"

"Yes. The ship's administrators made the decision. They'll take responsibility for it. We don't expect anyone coming from Earth to object too much—they'll be far too busy. All we've done so far is set the computers to translating and organizing the written records we've found. And we've just started on them. It should take at least a year."

"So that's why you weren't too concerned when we didn't return on schedule," Schneider said. "You were coming anyway. How long have you been here?" He'd been unconscious for hours—it was nearly evening.

Wight answered for Pam, "The aircar arrived just a little while after the fight."

"Yeah. The fight," Schneider repeated sarcastically. Wight had to be worried about how much of the "explanation" Schneider would contradict—and when.

Schneider was in no hurry.

"What were your findings in the town?" Schneider asked. "Did you learn anything about these temples?"

Pam laughed. "That's interesting, the way all of you refer to these buildings as temples."

"Aren't they?" Wight sounded genuinely puzzled.

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Pam shook her head. "These buildings were a form of art. They also served some other purposes, all mundane—possibly they were intended to produce given psychological effects. The aliens used their architecture to produce an emotional response, in the case of these structures, awe and fear. We picked that up in the written records. The corridors force you to walk a greater distance than necessary to the central room, imparting a sense of isolation, of being buried, of being severed from one's world. I don't know how you could have spent so much time in there. It made me shiver—" She paused, then said, "Actually we believe the effect may depend a great deal on one's preconditioning. Anyway, we'll finish here as quickly as possible and return to the town. Half the buildings there are like these, non-functional in our terms. According to the writings we've deciphered, some are supposedly erotic in effect. I couldn't see them that way." She laughed.

"Schneider didn't respond to this site," Wight said.

"Not at all?"

"No." Wight spoke before Schneider had a chance to say anything.

Pam stared at Schneider for a few seconds. "Well, maybe he's a little too human—and has rejected standard conditioning."

"This feeling of awe," Wight said quickly. "Couldn't it still have some relevance to the aliens' religion?"

"Trying to salvage your theory?" Schneider asked.

"No. None whatsoever," Pam said. "They were an extremely sophisticated, pragmatic species. They had no gods. None. Well, I'll have to find out if Mayeux has been located yet."

She climbed out of the aircar and walked away.

"That wasn't just a fight with Scofield over Margaret," Schneider said when she was out of earshot.

"I know. I had to tell them something."

"And when you tied me to that bench, you were planning a sacrifice—"

"I know what happened, Schneider. No need to remind me."

"I'm going to report everything when we get back."

"I realize that, Schneider." Wight turned to go back to where the others were sitting. "You'll still be all alone."

"Wight."

"Yes." Wight stopped but didn't look back at Schneider.

"No temples here. No gods."

"None but ours, Schneider."

"None but yours," Schneider said after a moment, but he had spoken quietly and Wight was already too far away to have heard.

Schneider sat down, then slid until he was lying on his back, staring up at the darkening sky. His head ached. ★

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THE DURABLE MAN

In the most daring experiment science ever devised, the group invited future—here!

DAVID PENNY

The final mutant

He lay in a hospital bed. The sheets, fresh and smooth, stretched tightly across his lean body. His eyes were closed and his breath whispered lightly between his parted lips. His head was shaven and attached to it were small conducting discs, taped to his temples and the supra-orbital ridges. Inside was his brain.

He wasn't thinking—he wasn't anything yet. He failed to exist. He lay in a negative state and would remain so until his makers, who sat in the large room that looked like the ground control of some starship venture, decided it was time to wake him.

It had taken him a long time to come this far. Seventy-seven years.

Those who had brought him to this place hoped the effort would prove worthwhile. But none of them would know for sure—not until someone pressed the switch to wake him.

He was seventeen years old and all his life had been unknowing. They had taught him, trained him, given him knowledge. But he was unaware of it, would remain unaware until they woke him for the first time. And then he would know all.

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He lay in the bed, unstirring.

The air in the room hummed slightly. The air-conditioning system was blowing in sterilized air from which his lungs filtered oxygen.

Inside his head . . .

In the control room there could be no more excuses, no more delay. Someone depressed the switch and beneath his dark eyelids his eyes rolled in their sockets as he dreamed of waking.

He was running—away—the horizon a never-approaching black line. Looking down, beneath his feet he saw the solid white line and he planted each foot in turn on it. Lifting the lagging limbs and bringing them forward—motion—running—without the knowledge of what it was he did. Something strange in the idea of motion—we all progress—only—there was just the roadway and the white line and he didn't look up because ahead was only the horizon, still as distant as ever.

And the rain—always there was the rain, falling fine in misty droplets that soaked into his skin and his feet, making a *shlick-shlick-shlick* sound against the roadway as he ran. The rain: the only reality, ever-present . . .

A beginning—Year 0: Day 001

The idea had been postulated long before anyone thought of attempting to bring it into reality. Three brains: each representing a point in evolution. Three layers of neural tissue, each with its own function, each overlapping the other, impinging into the other's territory and at times conflicting.

If only the three separate brains could be combined. If only when one felt an action was truly right it could be carried out, instead of the intellect's or the instinct's breaking in and preventing action. If only there were an end to the conflict inside the head, perhaps then conflict would end outside as well.

Two possibilities existed for the realization of the concept: surgical and biological.

Surgery was attempted, but the techniques required were too complex for surgeons to master. That left only the biological. Speed up the rate of evolution, so that the fusion of the disparate functions would occur naturally.

Take a normal man and a normal woman and subject them to controlled radiation. And correlated predictables.

Cut sections from ovaries—take samples of semen.

Let them mature—mix them—allow and encourage growth, stimulate them so that there are finally contained in a neutral medium many fertilized cells, each with the potential for life.

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Care for them, allow them to develop.

And as they grow—note the differences. In some the radiation has had a detrimental effect. In the majority—this is only the first generation—a high failure rate is to be expected. But some have adapted beneficially. Search out the embryo deformities—and terminate.

Allow the rest to develop.

Birth of the first generation.

Some are blind, others deaf—some have no sensory apparatus at all.

Some are deformed in minor ways. Club feet. Harelips.

Terminate failures.

You are left with a score of infants, each in its own isolated crib. Eight are male and eleven are female—of one you are uncertain. Discuss that. Is hermaphroditism what we want?

No. But interesting—isolate hermaphrodite and study development.

The survivors number nineteen.

At two years of age only five can talk and only four are capable of movement.

The others are failures. Terminate.

Two males. Two females.

At age eight one of the males dies. No one knows the reason.

Terminated by an act of God.

At age twelve the children, previously isolated from all contact with each other and the outside world—except for that filtered through to them by the scientists—are brought together.

A place is prepared for them, where there is always a vibration in the air from powerful radiation.

Their skin is slightly darker than that of normal children. Their eyes are a little brighter. Their minds are a little sharper, quicker to grasp at unrelated facts and make a whole of them.

They have names, given to them by the scientists who in sentimental moments have felt some small spark of feeling equivalent to parental concern. The real parents are long dead, killed by radiation poisoning. They were volunteers to begin with. No loss.

There are left—two females, one male.

The male is called Joseph (someone had suggested Adam, but that was too great a cliche for all of them).

The females are called Mary and Janet.

At age sixteen they are gradually weaned from their diet of drugs prescribed to prevent early onset of sexual interest.

It would be possible to produce offspring directly from these without need of intercourse, but there is some feeling among their makers. Allow them some little life—they will have so little time.

***In the room* [19: 192]**

Jo was reading a book, stretched

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out on the sofa, relaxed. Mary watched him, a small fluttering smile at the corners of her mouth. She stared at his absorbed face. Then her eyes moved down his body.

"Jan?" Mary turned and looked at the other girl. They had talked last night in their room, under the bedcovers, while Jo slept in his own bed in the same room, but unaware of their conversations.

"Mm?" Janet glanced back from the window she had been staring through all morning, watching the distant vista of trees and grass and rivers and mountains, seeing all from this room. She had been wondering if the outside could be real. All she knew of was this room, their bedroom and the washroom where they bathed and excreted bodily wastes.

Mary nodded toward Jo and smiled. Janet looked across and lifted her thin shoulders. Her small breasts trembled slightly in sympathy with the movement.

"Might as well. You know what to do, don't you?"

"I asked Dr. Roberts and he told me all about it."

"Well, if he said it was okay, then—" Janet was at that time far less affected by adolescent longings. But she had to admit that the sight of Jo lounging there had some kind of fascination.

Mary rose to her feet and walked to the couch. Jo looked up over the cover of his book at the movement and smiled distractedly at the girl. He took it all as a matter of routine. There was nothing in Mary's approaching him that he found either unusual or enticing.

Mary sat on the edge of the couch and placed her hand on his chest.

"Yes?" Jo looked up at her again. Mary said nothing, but moved her hand down to his groin. He flinched slightly. She had never touched him in that way before except accidentally.

"Jo—" Mary said softly.

Janet watched them, finding an excitement building inside her. She touched her breasts timidly—her own hand suddenly strange—and found her nipples had swollen.

She watched—mesmerized—as Mary leaned toward Jo and touched his mouth with her own. The action seemed so right.

And where Mary had her hand, Jo was growing. The meaning of the word man became clear in Janet's mind. Jo muttered something that was not words and slowly he and Mary slid from the couch to the floor. Janet moved across the room and kneeled at their side, pressing her hand to Jo's cheek. He looked up at her, something not before seen in his eyes, and his free hand reached up and touched her breast. It activated latent systems within her body which caused her to relax and lie down with the other two, touching Jo. Touching Mary touching Jo.

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Watching on their monitor screens the scientists smiled.

"Pornography is not yet dead," one said and the others grinned in response.

***The technology of change* [19: 301]**

Gravid ovulation is possible in both females.

Flash to computer: PREPARE INCUBATION AND FERTILIZATION PROCEDURE.

Their life is not yet ended. While they sleep plastic-suited technicians enter the room and untangle their limbs—all are now sleeping in one bed. The technicians are unable to separate them now that they have fully discovered each other, but are able to take samples from each of the three. These are carried back to the laboratories, where they are prepared and irradiated and forced to fertilization.

Eggs form.

The embryos are the beginnings of a second generation.

Some are deformed—terminate.

Mary, Joseph and Janet continue in their enclosed environment. When they have to, they eat. They are now being fed drugs to increase their sexual vigor and the scientists concerned with reproduction are replaced by those interested in anthropology. It is the first chance anyone has ever had to study future humans.

To some the entire procedure seemed very unfair—inhuman.

But we are making them human. Beings who will be the first true humans.

Inhuman — inhuman — inhuman—

Employment was curtailed.

Signs of mental retardation can now be detected in embryos (in eighteen years science has advanced and it has become possible to tell the sex, partially the intelligence and possible attitudes of a child before it is fully formed.)

Terminate.

"Oh, Jo—yes, Jo—oh, do that Jo, again—Jo—"

He does it, while Janet watches from eyes that are too bright, awaiting her turn. *Stamina, that's what that boy's got,* says a man in the control room. *Who can blame him? Wouldn't you have with those two?* asks another and they all laugh.

Five female doctors are on the staff, observing. During this phase of the experiment two of them become pregnant.

Finally, in the incubation vats, there are over a hundred tiny embryos hanging in vitreous fluid who have passed all the preliminary tests. Some will survive—perhaps ten percent. Possibly less.

Mary/Joseph/Janet—one final night of mingling.

Terminate.

***Present time: in the slow sleep* [77: 218]**

Only one doctor was present in

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the control room. She sat in a weary attitude in a chair facing the banks of monitor screens—five of them. The one directly in front of her showed the man lying in the unruffled bed. To its left were a readout of his life systems and a trace of his brain wave pattern. The jagged line of the latter was different from any other brain pattern ever recorded. To the right were a static display of the subject's genetic code and, below it on the same screen, his family tree. A screen beyond showed many observers crowding a room next to the subject's, watching him through a large sheet of one-way glass.

She hadn't cared to go down there with them. Not knowing why. For some reason reluctant.

She had been here longer than any of the others. Now she was approaching old age. She would be sixty-eight in another week. She did not yet feel old—but sometimes when she looked at herself and remembered how she had been years ago she experienced brief pangs of regret at what she had missed. She remembered moments of decision when she could have made her life other than what it now was.

Not that she hadn't done her homework—she was no virgin spinster. She had none of that in her past. But she had known times—moments of softness that had promised permanence of another kind. She had passed them by because at the time her work had seemed more important.

Now, she wasn't quite sure her decisions had been the right ones.

Looking down, watching Juan.

The first one. One. Juan.

He looked so peaceful. She knew she would never be able to tell what went on inside that head. That superior head, where all three brains had been fused into one, so that he could feel his instincts, control all the previously involuntary processes, utilize eighty per cent of his brain, instead of her own meager thirty per cent, and his brain itself half as large again as her own.

"You're getting old, Frances Pryce," she said to herself. "It's the way it had to be, and you know it very well." She smiled to herself and the lines in her face tightened, creasing the corners of her eyes.

Dream/wake/dream/hallucinate . . .

Running down through helical spirals of thought and returning along different pathways. Look at my genes, see the convolutions of my chromosomes. Fourth generation perfection.

I.

Am I what I am?

Running, slowing, halting.

Lungs filling, feel down in my mind to where the thoughts coalesce into action, energy links, reaction, feel the blood sigh through my

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veins, into capillaries, in the echoing lung caverns of air-filled silence, the hemoglobin comes tumbling down between the muscled walls and grabs with sticky protean fingers at the atoms of oxygen, grabbing with a needy greed at the substance of life.

Move in to depth. Heartbeat. Fibrils relax and jar back into contraction. Pump the blood, hissing through the veins another step.

Stomach contractions. Feel the electrodes taped to my skull. Vague awareness of many people close by. Awareness of body—of bed—sheets taut across skin—of walls—window looking out across countryside, pleasant—of a mirror—beyond it the many people—their thoughts tickling and intermingling with my consciousness.

Waking through layers of multiple sleep.

With full memory of past and present and—

***The ten* [38: 075]**

Abraham sat cross-legged on the table. The reason for the table was that it was the only surface upon which he could sit in this position and still be able to look out through the window.

There was something compelling about the view. He felt the pull of it with the edges of his mind, was aware of it distantly, but the awareness lay beyond his control so that he could not search out its cause or its source beyond simply knowing it was there.

He found fascination, too, in the duality of the scene. One view was made up of mountains and trees and rivers, grass before the building. Over the top of that lay another scene, where the mountains were bare and dust storms blew across a dark violet sky.

The duality was one he and the others had all lived with and didn't question. It had always been with them. It was natural.

He moved back inside his head and grew aware of the links being forged there. He could feel his heartbeat, always the heartbeat, the passage of blood through veins and arteries. But that was all.

So many things were still beyond his control.

He glanced down at his naked body, dark and smooth. Then he looked up at the window again. Something was moving through his field of vision. A large flying animal, swooping high up on shining leathery wings. Present and future fused.

He turned around and looked at the others in the room. All were at that moment absorbed in their own bodies, their own heads. This was the time for contemplation. Later they would eat and after that there would be the time for sex.

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Abraham realized he was eighteen years old and felt in some way that ought to be remarkable. Something was missing in his life. Eighteen shouldn't be this way. It should be—should . . .

But that was part of his inner brain—the part he could not yet understand. That was instinct. It was there, affecting him, but he couldn't yet unravel its meaning or change it. That was for his children to do.

There had been fourteen of them. Abraham could remember the others who had been with him when he had been younger. But they had been taken away. They had acted strangely, screaming in the night and in the day their eyes had rolled as they fought off imaginary devils. The doctors had said it was a thing called insanity. It was bound to happen to some of them—the changes were so great and rapid.

The doctors said that what Abraham and the others were doing was very important. The most important thing men had ever done.

Abraham didn't care.

He would have to love with Sheela tonight. He didn't find the prospect greatly exciting. He thought sex something of a bore, a task that had to be carried out because the doctors wanted it so.

But he would rather sit on this table and study the dual scenery outside.

He sighed and looked toward Sheela. She was pleasant to look at and pleasant to touch. Loving was perhaps better with her than with the others. He and Sheela would attain their own individual pleasures and the doctors would be satisfied until the next time.

Beyond the triple layer of glass the flying animal returned, its mouth opening but no sound reaching him.

***The staff* [36: 027]**

She stood outside the plain wooden door, feeling nervous and very young.

When the buzzer sounded she jumped slightly, then admonished herself with a brief grin and went in. The director was sitting behind his desk, the top covered with papers and books. He looked up at her, his contact lenses catching the light from his lamp and making his eyes look blank twin globes of white.

"Miss Pryce—so nice to see you, please, come in and sit down."

She smiled shyly and closed the door, went across and sat in the chair across from him, pulling her skirt down around her legs. She wondered if perhaps she should have worn something longer.

"Now then, Miss Pryce, no need to be nervous."

Does it really show that much?

"You know that you have already been accepted for a post in this establishment, but I always like to have a few words with new em-

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ployees. It can get pretty hectic in here at times and I might not get the chance to come out for air for several weeks at a time. So just that I know who you are—and you know me—I have these little informal chats."

She waited, then wondered if he expected some form of response. Finally she settled for a simple: "Yes, sir."

"You're working with—uh, let me see—" he flapped around the papers on his desk, not seeming to read any of them before he again looked up and said, "Yes, Dr. Thomas's group, isn't it?"

"That's right, sir. On the biomedical monitoring section."

"Yes. Rather important work that."

"Thank you, sir."

"Mm. But then, I suppose all work here is important in its own way. Even that of the ladies in the canteen. We couldn't do our work if we went unfed, could we?"

"I suppose not, sir."

"Yes." He hummed gently to himself, thinking perhaps of lunch, then seemed to pull himself back to the present. "You've—uh—been shown where you'll stay, have you? Not bad little places, really, our dormitories. Of course you can see the necessity of living on the premises, can't you? Highly secret work here. Hm. And you've been told about—uh, marriage—and that kind of stuff?"

"Yes, sir. If I marry outside the group my contract is automatically canceled."

"Yes, that's it." He seemed vaguely embarrassed, but didn't go on to explain why.

The girl nodded.

"Well, anything else you want to know—uh—Frances?"

She smiled sweetly.

"No, I don't think so, sir."

"Well. Good luck then. If ever there's any problem, just see my deputy about it. That's what we're here for."

"Yes. Thank you, sir." She stood up and smiled one final time at him and left. The director watched her go, his eyes following the tight curves inside her skirt and the long exposed backs of her legs.

Then he picked up his pen and began to leaf through the notes on his desk again.

***The technology of change—revisited* [39: 000]**

Only four of the ten were found to be fertile. It was something no one had thought to check on.

The redundant six were terminated.

For a while Abraham wondered what had happened to Sheela, but it had happened before. They always took away the people he liked most. Some malevolent God read his thoughts and then spirited the goodness from his life.

He slept on, unaware when they took the samples of semen from him.

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Fertilize.

First stage blastula—progression.

The tiny first intimation of humanity lay curled, no longer than a centimeter, complete with folded arms and legs and large blind eyes.

After selection there were forty developing fetuses locked into their metal and plastic-weave wombs.

***The bummer* [56: 100]**

The third generation was a foul-up. One hundred per cent snafu.

Not one of the Third was completely normal. Some were almost there, but even Jenny, the best of the twenty-eight thirds had her left leg six inches shorter than the right and six fingers to each hand (her feet were normal).

The physical changes were becoming far more noticeable than in previous generations. The skin was black with a sheen. Hair had begun to grow more rapidly and cover greater areas of the body (surprise was expressed: . . . *didn't think evolution would go that way*). Males were now wearing fine pelts of soft hair, covering all but the palms of hands, soles of feet, lips, and eyelids. The females' faces were free of hair and they had some bare patches on the buttocks and around their nipples—palms, feet, lips were hairless.

Features had changed also. The forehead was becoming more pronounced. The face was as before, but seemed to be compressed into a smaller area. Eyes were enlarged; nose was slightly reduced; mouth was wider, lips were thinner. Teeth were much smaller, but no less in number.

In their own way, to the scientist who had made them, they were quite beautiful, though they seemed hardly human any more. The scientists felt they were watching the performance of some species of exotic animal, some alien form. More than one thought of them as monkeys and watching them at sex could be embarrassing.

But they were also frightening animals. They were highly intelligent, but their intelligence was incomprehensible to their makers. Previous generations had been given lessons and taught about the outside world—this one was kept in ignorance, taught nothing. The observers were afraid of what present knowledge might do to them.

At age ten, nine of the twenty-eight were dead of disease of metabolic breakdown. At fourteen their number was reduced to an even dozen. Ten females and only two males. The males were watched over constantly, protected. If they should die out now, after all this time . . .

Sex was introduced.

A year passed.

One male died. He was ripped apart by five females fighting over him.

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The last male was stronger and the females realized he was all they had left, so they took him in turns. Except when Jenny wanted him. Jenny was the leader, her word was always law.

In many ways they *were* like animals, fighting and bickering among themselves for simple favors, arranging themselves into a heirarchic system of rights and privileges. But they reasoned brilliantly—without any information to base their reason on.

As infants and untutored, they had seemed from the first to be aware of that central core of their brains where instinct is stored, where emotion springs from. Tapping into it, discovering its uses, they deliberately passed through all stages of evolution as they grew—a process their observers equated with a search for knowledge. When young they had crawled like reptiles. As they grew older they lifted to hands and knees—at age thirteen they walked and moved as men and women with a sure knowledge of what they were.

No one else could understand or know them, quite. They were visitors from the future, images of man in a million years brought back in time by harsh scientific logic and harsher radiation on their cells.

They had crept through the instincts in their minds and then abandoned them as useless. Now they existed on pure but twisted logic. But what did they think? What did they see?

A strange, sorry lot.

***Interval* [58: 276]**

Fran Pryce lit a cigarette and shook out the match. She placed it carefully in the tin top from some dried milk can she had salvaged for an ashtray on this table. She looked across at the man sitting opposite and shook her head.

"I still don't see why they should evolve in this way," she said. "Look—according to all the predictions we've run through the computers they should gradually change to fit into the environment. Right? We know that happened all along with other life forms, including humans. So why, now, do they go against all laws? They should be four feet tall, hairless, with no teeth and reduction in locomotor function. But they're the opposite. They have more hair. The teeth are still there and even more efficient if anything. So why? Tell me, why the hell?"

The man shook his head, stared across at Fran. She was still very attractive and didn't look in her late forties. If he hadn't known and had been asked to guess he might have said she was thirty-four or thirty-five.

"Perhaps our computations are based on the wrong premises," he finally said. "What if there is a change in the environment in the

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future? How can we take that into consideration?"

"But how do they?"

"I ran it through the big computer in the basement. I asked what environmental conditions would be necessary to produce what we've got. I figured we've tried the other way around enough—trying to figure out why they should be how they are."

"What did it say?" Fran asked.

"Reduction in atmosphere, much of upper layer blown away so more radiation coming in. Little ozone layer, so high ultraviolet. Dessication of planet surface. Lack of plant life—therefore they'd have to be largely carnivorous—probably fishing in what few oceans were left. Population would be very low, most likely, but then who'd expect man in a million years still to be around on Earth at all?"

"They could be adapted to space flight," Fran said.

"The computer said that, too. The same factors fit. Low intake of liquids—storage problems. Exposure to harsh radiation. I'm not sure about the teeth, but maybe they've invented some equivalent of hardtack and need pretty efficient choppers to deal with it."

Fran smiled slightly. "We're talking as if they were from some time up there," she nodded at the ceiling, an abitrary direction. "But we *made* them. How can they tell what it might be like a hundred, a million years ahead?"

The man shrugged.

Fran sighed out a thin streamer of smoke. "They can't, can they? It's impossible."

"Why are they like they are then?"

She shook her head. "There has to be some reason, we just haven't found it yet."

***Jenny* [59: 107]**

The last remaining male was schizophrenic—there was nothing anyone could do about it. His body chemistry was so altered by evolution that nothing they gave him helped.

The man shrugged.

He sat most of the time in a corner, looking up at the bright images which he projected from his own private skull.

Two of the females were idiots—drooling, only coming alive when the male's fantasies took a sexual turn. The others had fairly normal intelligence—that is, for them. The team of observers translated the results of their tests to read something like 210 on the standard human I.Q. scale.

Jenny read somewhere over 280.

She had light yellow eyes and a face that even the most unfeeling among the observers agreed was pretty.

Her hair was all over blond and contrasted with the dark sheen of her skin. She was well formed and she always had first priority on the male. With this generation the chil-

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dren were not formed artificially, but allowed to come naturally.

Jenny became pregnant. Then, as if on signal, two other females were gravid.

Parturition took place thirteen months after conception.

Juan was born.

Then Dee, and finally Tricia.

A nicely balanced group, the observers thought.

The third generation died out naturally. They had been the penultimate leap. Their body chemistries, in previous generations so tortured and forced, had finally revolted and in the process severely cut their life spans. Jenny was the last to die. She was just twenty years old.

***Dawnlight* [77: 218]**

Dreams. Oh the dreams that pull at the seams of my mind. Tell me what I am!

Filtering down through the grayness is a small spark, settling into my mind, floating down through the layers I know so intimately, until finally it stops, deep in my core, the one place I cannot yet reach and I sleep, waiting for the light to flood out the shadows in this skull.

"He blinked. I saw it, he blinked!" The girl swung around and hugged the man next to her. The roomful of observers tensed.

From her solitary post Frances Pryce watched, her lips held in a tight line. This wasn't right—she knew it wasn't, had known it all along but, once committed, she had never had the courage to say so. She had been here so long now that her alternatives had vanished.

Wake me wake me wake me I want to see the light and smell and taste the sun. Everything is blurred, dancing on my retinas. But I can reach out and soothe the optic nerve fibers and the jarring stops. Images form. Neural highways are opening—I have to grow up so quickly, but it's coming—I feel it all coming to me now.

In my brain. All laid open to me now. Like a brightly lit plan seen from high above I see who I am, what I am, how I am. I am. I—

Fran watched his lean body as it moved beneath the sheets. Then his hand rose to scratch the tip of his nose in a gesture so human she smiled despite her tenseness. And then he sat up, threw back the sheet and stood erect. She opened her mouth slightly, because it was impossible not to be awed.

He stood almost seven feet tall, with skin that seemed to glow with dark light through a fine down of pale white hair. His face was caught up beneath that ponderous brow—the eyes clear and deep,

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showing no whites, only the irises and the pupils dark in their centers. He stretched his arms—then smiled.

"Juan—" she whispered to herself and to the empty control room that had suddenly taken on a derelict air. Seventy years of purpose and activity and now she was left with just herself, the machines run down and their functions ended—except for the almost silent tick of the clock above her head.

> Body. Good. That is a body. Correlate and index. Arms/legs/chest/stomach/genitals/feet/hands/fingers/eyes/nose/mouth/lips.
>
> Smile. Feels good. Awake.
>
> Look in the mirror and see myself for the first time. A strange experience. Correlate. Not too bad, considering. I quite like how they've made me.
>
> They must think I can't see them. I'll wave. That'll surprise them. Hi there!
>
> No wave back. Just puzzlement.
>
> HI THERE!
>
> Oh, what have I done?

In the observation room the doctors and nurses clutched their heads as the static burst into their brains. From a distance Frances Pryce caught the tail end of the thought/call and heard it as it was meant to be. She stared at her instruments, then at the central console showing Juan.

> Someone's there, I can tell. What have I done to the others?

She didn't know how to answer and discovered the beginnings of fear.

Juan reached out with his mind, curious, and touched the edges of the woman's. There was too much noise from those who were nearer—all of them were crying out over something that pained.

He felt her thoughts and entered them.

She gasped. It was like . . . But that had been long ago.

He moved along through the dusty, ancient tracks of man as he used to be. Growing to know this woman as she had been. Seeing through her eyes all of her past, feeling through her body all that had been. He found joy, pain and ecstasy all mixed and intermingled. And a terrible confusion. She lived in a mind sealed within itself, not knowing how to control her body or where her thoughts came from—or where *she* was among it all, where the feelings of sadness and love and weeping came from or went to.

He felt with her the moments of her past. The first time she made love. The last time. How her body felt now. The times in between. Her thoughts, ambitions, secrets, fantasies. He saw her harbored and

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secret shames and discovered her deep guilt feelings.

Why did she keep them, harbor them, nurse them? Presently he saw why. She couldn't rid herself of them. Memory for this woman was permanent.

He couldn't imagine how it was possible to live as she did. With all that shut up inside her head and with her all the time.

He sorted her mind, cleaned it, bundled it up safe and left.

She opened her eyes as she felt the last traces of Juan's presence leave her.

She felt sated, all passions and all guilts gone. She felt happy.

She turned to the screen and Juan was gone. She reached out and spun the dial and found all the rooms empty.

She stopped suddenly and sat back in the chair. *Why not? Why should they stay here? Surely enough has been done to them already. We made them, forced them into an early growth and how can we act surprised that they show no gratitude?*

But she could feel no anger or pain or loss—or guilt—any more.

Just a soft, enclosing contentment.

She closed her eyes slowly, tired now that it was finally all over.

***Triad* [77: 300]**

They were high on a mountain and they could tell there was no danger yet of their being found. And this was good, for there were decisions to be made.

Juan stood on a spur of rock jutting out over the face of a tall cliff. Below him stretched the bare, tan stone, the sun wavering heat from its face. Farther down grew scrubby trees—then a rolling forest reached down through the foothills, beyond which lay the plains.

He realized distantly the metaphysical aspects of his standing where he stood. A practical need for privacy and freedom had brought him here. Now, with the whole world beneath him, open to his view, a part of his mind drew information from the racial memories evoked by the scene in his mind. These were, he discovered, a constant reality to him, so that he lived as much in the past as he did in the present, time flow only a set of ascending slopes to him. Before, there had been no Juan—but there had been image of Juan in the future memory of the race.

But such considerations could wait. He had immediacies to decide—he and Dee and Tricia.

Aware of the hills and the trees and also of the barren dry world of the future—and again of his million-years-in-the-future self, a product of the natural evolution that coursed between the stars—he focused on the present.

He looked back over his shoulder to where the two women were sitting on the bare rock and smiled at them. He loved them both, with

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an equal intensity, knowing every contour of their bodies and every convolution of their thoughts.

He linked with their two minds and the triad became a greater whole, able to reach out and touch the globe, feeling within its awareness the flickering candles of intelligence that were men and women and children and the dim slow movements of their thoughts.

They're too old, the part that was Tricia communicated to the other two.

Or perhaps we are too young, Juan thought. *We arrived too early. Our time is yet a long way off.*

We were forced to come. They made us come, Tricia sent.

Dee remained silent, the core of their binding, holding each to the other. Each member of the group was playing an individual role and together they were greater than the sum of the three.

Tricia, the synthesist, said, *They made us for their own reasons. They were selfish, with no thought for us in the matter. They wanted to make themselves greater and it didn't matter to them how we might feel.*

Juan, the questioner, answered. *They didn't know. They meant well. Who are we to blame them?*

Their children. We are their children, Dee sent and the other two knew it was right, because Dee was their inner core of certainty.

Was it a premature birth? Juan asked. *Did we come too early?*

Too early for what? Too early for them? Or for us?

Tricia—we and they are the same. They are us—we are they. But the separation makes matters difficult. We belong to a time a million years ahead, but not to their time. It can't be this way.

So? Tricia asked.

She and Juan waited, because they could feel the answer Dee held. Dee was their soul, Dee their center, the decider. She knew and she would tell them.

Well? Juan asked gently.

We are the future, Dee sent. *They are the past. We cannot join with our own kind, but we can bring the future back to this time. It's the only way it can be.*

So . . . Juan left the thought open.

No other way, Dee sent.

Tricia?

Yes. Dee is right. They brought us here—now. We must bring ourselves here, too, without them.

Juan turned away from the cliff and walked to the two women, sat down with them. He reached out and touched each of their faces with his fingertips and they smiled at him.

The thought came simultaneously in each of their minds.

Terminate.

Zero Time—Infinity

Cold dry air and small, thick, salty ocean with strange fish beneath its surface. Stars. ★

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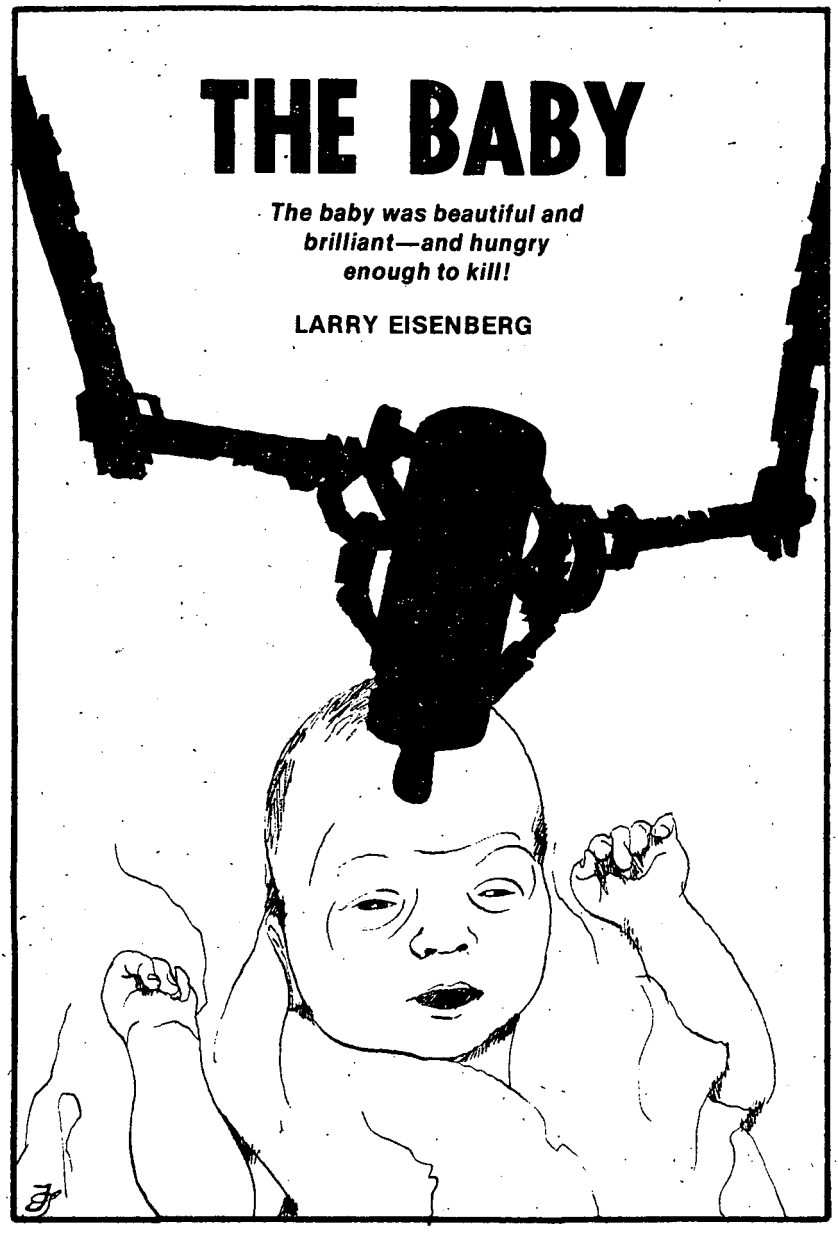
THE BABY

The baby was beautiful and brilliant—and hungry enough to kill!

LARRY EISENBERG



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THE baby gurgled.

He was round and amiable, with plump pink cheeks that glowed like twin rosebuds. He was only three months old but he uttered soft pleasant sounds, waved his arms and even kicked out occasionally.

Dull gray electrodes were taped at the corners of his eyes. A tiny microphone rested inside an inflatable cuff wrapped around one of his fat arms. Two more electrodes nestled snugly against his chest—others were not in clear view.

Dr. Corgan typed a couple of short coded instructions that set his computer into action. It was a compact system situated at one corner of the large sunlit room. There were two tape decks, a control console, a line printer, card reader and the typewriter.

Dr. Corgan walked back to the center of the room and looked fondly at the baby.

"Lower the barbells," he said loudly.

He was aware of the artificial quality that always crept into his voice when he was giving the baby instructions but he couldn't help it. High above, suspended from the ceiling by an intricate complex of pulleys, a brightly colored set of barbells swayed gently. He looked at the baby and then once again at the barbells. He waited patiently and then, as though by magic, they began to descend until they passed just by his eyes. The barbells were massive but lovely, with hand-painted figures done by a dear friend, a fine oil painter.

Dr. Corgan leaned forward once again.

"Open the laboratory door," he said.

He waited expectantly until the door opened, then sighed with pleasure. A warmed bottle of milk shifted down and forward into the baby's open mouth and he began to suck vigorously. His arms and legs churned contentedly. Dr. Corgan nodded and left the room. In a cubicle behind the east wall of the laboratory was a two-way mirror, through which he could observe what the baby did without being seen in turn. On occasion he gave instructions from a microphone placed behind the mirror and then studied the baby's response before returning to the lab to type new coded instructions for the computer.

Nurse Thompson sat there knitting, smartly set gray curls peeping out of the sides of her starched white cap. Dr. Corgan didn't like Nurse Thompson. She had no feeling for what he was attempting to do and was forever calling his attention to the length of time the baby had been in the laboratory. He looked at his watch and grimaced.

"Mrs. Thompson," he said with an edge of malice in his voice. "I think it's time to return the baby to the nursery."

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He enjoyed the slow flush of embarrassment that spread over her rouged cheeks at the realization of her dereliction of duty. She put down her knitting and went inside to remove the electrodes from the baby. When she came out, carrying it, the baby was wrapped in a warm yellow blanket, the pink nose the only feature showing out of the wool.

"Good night," said Dr. Corgan.

AFTER Mrs. Thompson had taken the infant back to the foundling home Dr. Corgan trudged down the hall to his office. A short bald man sat waiting for him. The visitor seemed amiable enough, although there was a hint of aggression in his probing look. Dr. Corgan hesitated before offering his hand.

"You are Mr. Tanner?"

"Of the *Medical Times,*" was the reply.

Dr. Corgan shuffled some papers on his desk. He had dreaded this interview and yet he welcomed it. Publicity was a vital part of research, but it had to be carefully controlled.

"Let me start from the beginning," he said.

Tanner smiled.

"I appreciate that," he said. "Some researchers give me a tangled web of ideas that are impossible to understand. I like to start from the beginning."

His pencil was poised over a lined yellow pad. Dr. Corgan's fingers trembled slightly. He sighed and began.

"There have been extensive studies of learning in children. The starting age for reading has been lowered to two years by means of programed reading machines. But two is hardly the lowest possible limit."

"What has happened to childhood?" asked Tanner, lifting his pencil.

Dr. Corgan was startled.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I didn't mean to interrupt you," said Tanner. "But if kids are busy learning to read at two—when will they have time for bikes and mudpies? What's the rush? Why can't

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they learn at six or seven?"

Dr. Corgan sat on his anger.

"That's a fair question," he said. "The answer is—because they *can* learn at an earlier age. Don't you see? This means that an entire intellectual horizon is opened to them, including communication with their parents on a higher plane. Children play with mud only because they have nothing better to do."

"I see," said Tanner.

"But to get back to the thread of my thought. There have been many studies with infants at Harvard, Princeton and elsewhere. But all of these studies have focused on how infants develop and learn."

"So I understand," said Tanner.

Dr. Corgan smiled gently.

"I've gone far beyond those studies," he said. "I've begun to teach infants to carry out very complex, sophisticated tasks."

"But how? They can't speak and they certainly can't move their limbs in a controlled way."

"All true," said Dr. Corgan. "Nevertheless they have brain waves, blood pressure levels, electrocardiograms, sweat gland reactions and a host of other physiological parameters at their disposal."

"But surely," said Tanner, "these are beyond their conscious control? Blood pressure levels and heart rate are both controlled by the autonomic nervous system, not consciously."

Dr. Corgan waved his hands.

"All the so-called autonomic factors are readily controllable by the conscious mind. I've already proved that point with laboratory rats and human adult patients. Do you recall the woman who learned to lower her diastolic blood pressure by twenty-five millimeters of mercury?"

"I read about her," said Tanner. "But not everyone agreed with your explanation of how it came about."

Dr. Corgan shrugged.

"The point is that it did work! And the same technique works even better with infants. These babies are free of all the complicated clutter of growing up and the interaction with their family and outsiders. By the use of a judicious combination of rewards and punishments, the infant can be taught to do anything."

"Anything?"

"The statement is not as rash as you might think. For example, raising or lowering one's blood pressure is not always an end in itself. It offers control over two possible eventualities. Add to that the option of raising or lowering the rate of heartbeat and you now have four possible independent combinations. Suppose now that we use *ten* physiological variables, each measurable and each with two directions to go. We end up with over one thousand possible combinations! Can you conceive of how many things an infant can accomplish with over one thousand pat-

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terns of responses available to him?"

"I'm skeptical," said Tanner, "but I'm always willing to believe my eyes. May I see a demonstration?"

"Why not?" said Dr. Corgan. "There are sleeping facilities available here but usually the baby is returned to the foundling nursery for the night. But if you will come back tomorrow afternoon I'll be happy to show you some of the things he can do."

"Would two o'clock do?"

"Fine," said Dr. Corgan.

TANNER was prompt the following afternoon, but Dr. Corgan was in bad temper.

"I've had some problems today," he said. "But we'll go on with the demonstration anyway."

"I could come back another time."

"Nonsense," said Dr. Corgan.

He rose and led Tanner to the observation room adjoining his laboratory.

"Look in there," he said. "The baby has just carried out an assigned task and the bottle of milk was lowered into his mouth as a reward. In order to get it, he had to hit the correct direction of change unerringly in ten physiological parameters which are being monitored off electrodes. These signals are fed into the computer which will accept only the proper combination. It then returns a control signal, which places the bottle in the baby's mouth."

"That's incredible," said Tanner. "I could believe that the youngster controls one of the parameters. But ten simultaneously?"

"That's *my* contribution," said Dr. Corgan. "Watch the baby. Notice that he can do several things. He can raise and lower those pretty barbells up there, open and close the laboratory door, turn the lights on and off, and a host of other little tasks."

"But how does one explain how he learns to do all this?"

"Nobody knows as yet," said Dr. Corgan. "But I think that it involves the untold neural networks available to the conscious and unconscious parts of the nervous system. These networks are as yet undiscovered, uncharted and functionally a complete mystery. But demonstrably we can achieve a linkup through these networks if we really want to."

"Have human beings always had this capability?"

"I think so. Perhaps it was needed during the early years of mankind's primitive existence."

The baby began to cry. His voice became strident and his face began to purple with frustration. His arms and legs flailed wildly.

"Damn!" cried Dr. Corgan. "That blasted nipple must be leaking again and he's run out of milk. Ordinarily he never cries unless something goes wrong. He knows

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he can get his food simply by altering his parameters to the right code."

"He's really upset," said Tanner. "Probably frustrated, too."

"He wants instant gratification," said Dr. Corgan. "Like all infants, he wants what he wants right away. I'll wait a few minutes and then help him. He's got to learn that patience is one of the facts of life."

The lights began to go on and off. The barbells rose and descended. The bottle went in and out. An alarm bell rang.

"Is the baby doing all that?" asked Tanner incredulously.

"Yes," said Dr. Corgan thoughtfully. "You see, he's trying every possible combination he knows, an excellent effort—one that deserves recognition. Now I'll go in and help him."

As Tanner watched, Dr. Corgan went into the laboratory and examined the faulty bottle. As he tugged at the nipple, the barbells descended rapidly.

"Look out!" called Tanner.

Dr. Corgan jumped to the side as the barbells shot past his head. Then he refilled the bottle with fresh formula, attached a new nipple and inserted the bottle again into its holder. The bottle slid down and forward into the baby's mouth and the crying choked into a soft gurgle of contentment.

When he returned to the observing room Dr. Corgan found Tanner in a state of agitation.

"You could have been hurt," he said.

"I might have been if you hadn't called out," admitted Dr. Corgan. "I've got to be more alert. Our setup is quite complicated, you know."

He answered a few more questions and then Nurse Thompson came in, a look of triumph on her face.

"It's time for the baby to return to nursery," she said, staring hard at Dr. Corgan. He was too distracted to notice her delight in her small victory.

"Take him," he said.

"I've got to run, too," said Tanner, stretching out his hand. "I want to thank you for all your help."

WHEN Tanner had gone Dr. Corgan fretted over the interview. Had he talked too freely? Had the emphasis been put inappropriately? What impression would the press give the public about his work? Had Tanner been hostile? Would there be a lurid banner line like INFANTS TURNED TO AUTOMATA, or THOUGHT CONTROL REALIZED? Dr. Corgan sighed. Would anyone appreciate his true motivation, which was to enrich the intellectual pleasures of every infant?

He ate sparingly that night and slept badly in his bachelor bed. He was at the laboratory at seven the following morning, working on the bottle-nipple arrangement that had given him so much trouble during

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the interview. Perhaps the problem was the angle at which the bottle entered the baby's mouth. He operated the slide by hand and saw it come down and forward. It was possible that the whole arrangement was an eighth of an inch too high, enough to make the baby pull the nipple forward under too much stress, allowing the milk to leak.

He began to laugh. It was incredible that an experiment of such complexity should founder because of a bottle and nipple. He tried several positions for the holder and when the baby arrived he thought he had it properly adjusted. But apparently he was wrong. He set and reset it, but the nipple kept sliding off the mouth of the bottle.

By five-thirty Nurse Thompson was hovering about, crying the lateness of the hour. He became fully exasperated.

"Go home," he said angrily. "I must get this fixed tonight. The baby will sleep in the laboratory crib and I'll stay with him."

"But you'll overtire him—"

"Please get out of here, Mrs. Thompson. I'll assume all responsibility for what happens."

AT LAST he thought he had it.

"Ring the alarm bell," he told the baby.

The alarm rang and the bottle moved forward. The baby's mouth seemed to leap at the bottle and the nipple flew off. A torrent of milk cascaded over the baby's face. At first he seemed to strangle—then he coughed and finally bellowed his disappointment.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Dr. Corgan. "It was all an accident. I'll set it right."

He painstakingly reset the slide and replaced the nipple carefully on the bottle. Everything seemed perfect again. He was leaning over the apparatus, admiring his handiwork, when the barbell struck him heavily at the back of his skull and he tumbled to the floor, slowly sinking into a deep void. As he lay there, fighting the descent, he thought dimly, *What a terrible accident. I must call for help . . .*

From a vast distance he heard the sucking noise. How delightful to know that now everything was working perfectly. Next the door to the observing room closed and soon afterward the lights went out.

With a terrible effort he lifted his head and looked about.

What a marvelous little fellow he is, Dr. Corgan thought for a fleeting moment. *He's learned his lessons beautifully. What a pity that no one else is here to see it . . .*

The baby had stopped sucking now and was cooing contentedly. Dr. Corgan could imagine him lying there in the darkness, round and amiable with pink plump cheeks that glowed like twin rosebuds.

The soft pleasant gurgling noises were the last he heard. ★

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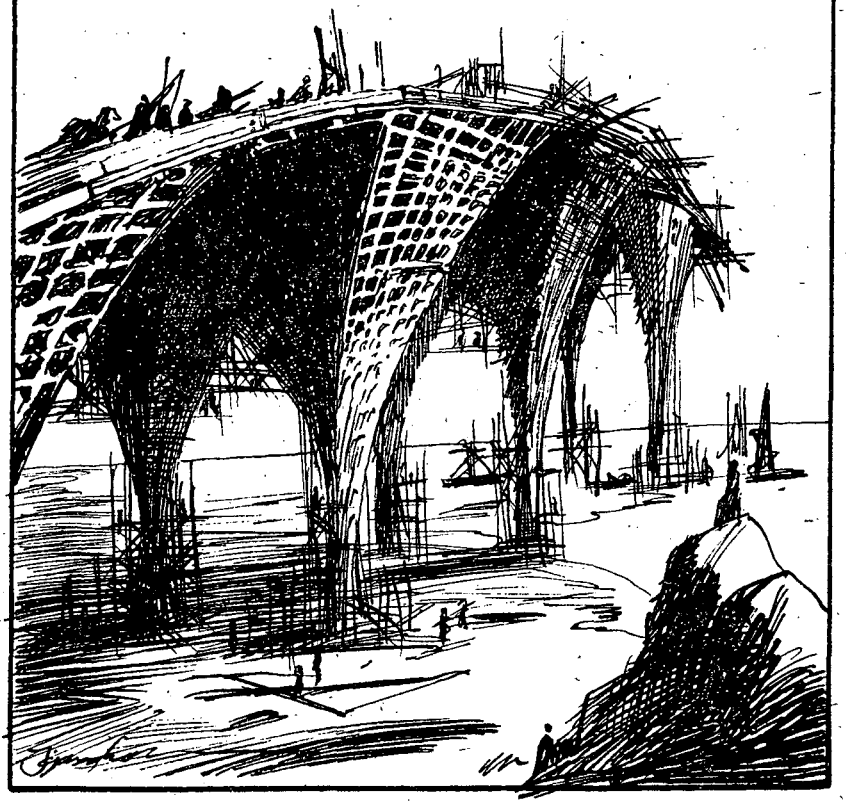
INVERTED WORLD

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST



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WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Helward Mann *of Earth City has reached manhood at the age of six hundred and fifty miles. His age is reckoned by the city's progress toward the Optimum—e.g. from the moment of* Helward's *birth Earth City has traveled six hundred and fifty miles toward this elusive goal, a process of which* Helward *knows little or nothing. His early years, spent in the creche with other city children, have been sheltered. His education has been Earth oriented and has given him little information about the planet the city now traverses.*

Following elaborate rites welcoming him to adulthood—at which Helward *elects to become an apprentice of the Future Surveyors' Guild and his engagement to a girl named* Victoria Leroüex *is announced—*Helward *is permitted to see his first sunrise, actually his first glimpse of the outside. Assigned to serve his initial term as an apprentice with the Trackmen's Guild, he discovers that the city moves forward across the planet's surface on rails painstakingly laid ahead of it and as painstakingly removed once they have served their purpose (a) to prevent the city's sliding backward and (b) to be reused. He also learns that the city is fusion-powered and is the sole source of the good life on the planet—it alone has adequate (if tasteless and synthetic) food, clothing, medical and educational facilities. It uses these to barter for workers and women to bear children—of which it has a shortage—from among primitive tribes of aliens or "tooks" en route. The women acquired by barter remain in the city long enough to bear a child to a city male, are then returned to their tribes.*

The knowledge of how the city came to be is lost. It is, however, known that somehow it originated on Earth and that, in order to survive, it must be winched constantly toward the Optimum, which moves ahead of it. Instructions to this effect are contained in a document known as Destain's Directive, *handed down from the city's founder in some dim antiquity.*

Ideally the city should progress at the rate of one-tenth of a mile a day. This pace, however, is never maintained—there is uneven terrain to contend with; rivers and gorges must be bridged. The city has never been closer than three miles to the Optimum. This, however, is enough to keep it alive and functioning.

There is discontent both within and outside the city. Helward *experiences both.* Victoria, *whom he has married, finds her life in urban confinement pointless.* Helward *has taken an apprentice's oath never to discuss the outside or the city's relationship to it with the uninitiated under penalty of death. To save his marriage, however, he*

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breaks his vow in conversations with Victoria. *He also is involved and injured in a riot of resentful "took" workers.*

After serving his apprenticeship Helward *is sent south—into the city's "past"—to escort home three local women for whose child-bearing services the city has bartered to alleviate its woman-shortage. He discovers that the landscape that should have been familiar to him from the city's passage has subtly altered—a ravine the city had bridged with great difficulty has shrunk to a mere ditch; mountains have lost height. The terrain has flattened out and the tracks of the city's passing have spread out.*

The three women with him also seem to grow shorter and broader until they split their dresses and must proceed naked. He himself remains physically unchanged—but discovers himself experiencing a strange force pulling him southward . . .

He has a terrifying experience when this mysterious pull sweeps him off his feet, smashes him against a cliff, then drags him up the nearly vertical side of the mountain and threatens to hurl him to oblivion on the other side. He fights clear and, having lost the women, makes his way back to the city—only to find it under attack by armed "tooks."

Helward *joins the defenders and the attack is repulsed. Parts of the city have been badly damaged, but it stubbornly continues its journey northward through this and subsequent attacks.*

Other changes in the city that have taken place during his absence Helward *finds more striking. Evidently more time has passed in the city than he had counted on. In the interim his wife has given birth to a child, who has died, and she has divorced him. The city has grown more reliant on its own manpower now that the countryside has rebelled against its hiring practices. Gradually, the city returns to norm—but it is a new norm.*

Helward *adjusts to it.*

XXIX

THE following day—when I rode north with Blayne to start the future survey—marked the beginning of a long period of regained security and radical changes for the city.

I saw both processes develop gradually, for my own sense of actual city time was distorted by my journeys to the north. I learned by experience that a day spent at a distance roughly twenty miles north of optimum was equivalent to an hour of elapsed time in the city. As far as possible I kept in touch with what happened by attending as many Navigators' meetings as I could.

The placidity of the city's existence that I had experienced when I first left to work outside returned more quickly than most people had expected.

There were no more attacks by the tooks, although one of the militiamen, engaged in an intelligence mission, was captured and killed. Soon after this the leaders of the

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militia announced that the tooks were dispersing and heading for their settlements in the south.

Although military vigilance was maintained for a long time—and was never in fact wholly abandoned—men from the militia were gradually freed to work on other functions.

As I had learned at that first Navigators' meeting, the method of hauling the city was changed. After several initial difficulties had been overcome the operation was successfully converted to a system of continuous traction, using a complicated arrangement of alternating cables and phased track-laying. One-tenth of a mile in twenty-four hours was not, after all, a considerable distance—and within a short time the city had reached optimum.

This gain actually gave the city greater freedom of movement. From optimum it was possible, for instance, to take considerable detours from a bearing of true north if a sufficiently large obstacle were to appear.

In actual fact, however, the terrain was good. As our surveys showed, the overall elevation of the land was falling and more gradients were in our favor than were against us.

More rivers crossed this region than the Navigators would have liked and the Bridge-Builders were kept busy. But with the city at optimum and with its greater capacity for speed relative to the movement of the ground more time was available for decision-making and for building a safe bridge.

With some hesitation at first, the barter system was reintroduced. Negotiations were conducted more scrupulously than before. The city paid more generously for manpower—which was still needed—and tried for a long time to avoid the necessity of bartering for women.

Through a long series of Navigators' meetings I followed the debate on this last subject. We still had the seventeen transferred women inside the city who had been with us since before the first attack—they had expressed no desire to return to their villages. But the predominance of male births continued and there was a strong lobby for the return of the transfer system. No one knew why there should be such an imbalance in the distribution of the sexes, but it was undoubtedly so. Furthermore, three of the transferred women had given birth within the last few miles and each of these babies had been male. It was suggested that the longer women from outside remained in the city, the more chance there was that they, too, would produce male children. Again, no one understood why.

At the last count there was a total of seventy-six male and fourteen female children below the age of one hundred and fifty miles. As the percentage continued to mount the Barter guild eventually was authorized to resume transfer negotiations.

The decision served to highlight the social changes that were taking place. The open-city system had remained and non-guildsmen were allowed to attend Navigators' meet-

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ings as spectators. Within a few hours of the announcement everyone in the city knew that the barter for women was being renewed and many voices were raised in protest. Nevertheless, the decision was implemented.

Although hired labor was again being used, fewer men were taken on and a considerable number of people from the city continued to work on the tracks and cables. Hence there was not much that wasn't known about the city's operations.

But general education about the real nature of the world on which we lived remained poor.

DURING one debate I heard the word "Terminator" used for the first time. The Terminators apparently were a group of people who actively opposed the continued movement of the city and were committed to halting it. As far as was known they were not militant and would take no direct action, but they were gaining a considerable amount of support within the city and a program of reeducation was begun to dramatize the necessity of moving the city northward.

At the next Council meeting there was a violent disruption—a group of people burst into the chamber and tried to take the chair. I was not surprised to see that Victoria was among them.

After a noisy argument the Navigators summoned the assistance of the militia and the meeting was closed.

This disruption, perversely, had the effect desired by the Terminator movement—the Navigators' meetings were once again closed to the public. The dichotomy in the opinions of the ordinary people of the city widened. The Terminators had a considerable amount of support, but no real authority.

A few incidents followed. A cable was found cut in mysterious circumstances and a Terminator tried one day to speak to the hired men in an attempt to get them to return to their villages . . . still, by and large the Terminator movement was no more than a thorn in the side of the Navigators.

Reeducation went well. A series of lectures attempted to explain the peculiar dangers of this world and they were well attended. The design of the hyperbola was adopted as the city's motif and was worn as an ornament on the guildsmen's cloaks, stitched inside the circle on their breasts.

I don't know how well the lectures were understood by the ordinary people of the city—I overheard some discussion of the subject but the influence of the Terminators perhaps weakened the program's credibility.

In spite of everything the city continued to move slowly northward. Sometimes I would take time off from other matters and try to view it in my mind's eye as a tiny speck of matter on an alien world. I would see it as an object of one universe trying to survive in another—as a city full of people, holding on to the side of a forty-five degree slope, pulling its way against a tide of ground on a few thin strands of cable.

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With the return to a more stable environment for the city the task of future surveying became more routine.

For our purposes the ground to the north of the city was divided into a series of segments, radiating from optimum at five-degree intervals. Under normal circumstances the city would not seek a route that was more than fifteen degrees away from due north, but our extra capability to detour did allow considerable flexibility.

Our procedure was simple. Surveyors would ride north from the city—either alone or, if they chose, in pairs—and conduct a comprehensive survey of the segment allotted to them. There was plenty of time available to us.

On many occasions I would find myself seduced by the feeling of freedom in the north—the experience, Blayne once told me, was common to most Futures. Where was the urgency to return if a day spent lazily on the bank of a river wasted only a few minutes of the city's time?

There was, however, a price to pay for the time spent in the north, though it did not seem real to me until I saw its effects for myself. A day spent idling in the north was a day in my life. In fifty days I aged the equivalent of five miles in the city, but the city people had aged only four days. It did not matter at first—our return visits to the city were so frequent that I saw and felt no difference. But in time, the people I had known—Victoria, Jase, Malchuskin—seemed not to have aged at all, but catching a sight of myself in a mirror one day I saw the effect on myself.

I did not want to settle down permanently with another girl—Victoria's notion that the ways of the city would disrupt any relationship took greater meaning for me every time I considered it.

The first of the transferred women were coming to the city and as an unmarried man I was told that I was eligible to mate temporarily with one of them. At first I resisted the idea because, to be frank, it repelled me. It seemed to me that even a purely physical affair should have some complement in shared emotions. But whenever I was in the city I and other eligible men were encouraged to mix socially with the girls in a recreation room set aside for this purpose. I found these meetings embarrassing and humiliating at first, but as I grew used to them my inhibitions eventually waned.

In time a girl named Dorita and I discovered a mutual liking. Soon she and I were allocated quarters for privacy. We did not have much in common, but her attempts to speak English were delightful and she seemed to enjoy my company. Soon she was pregnant and between my surveying missions I watched her pregnancy proceed.

Slowly, so unbelievably slowly.

I began to grow increasingly frustrated with the apparently sluggish progress of the city. By my own subjective time scale, a hundred and fifty, perhaps two hun-

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dred miles had elapsed since I had become a Future guildsman—yet the city was still in sight of the hills we had been passing through at the time of the attacks.

I applied for a temporary transfer to another guild. Much as I enjoyed the leisured life in the future I felt that time was passing me by.

For a few miles I worked with the Traction guild and it was during this period that Dorita gave birth. She produced twins—a boy and a girl. Much celebration . . . but I found that the city life discontented me in another way. I had been working with Jase, who had once been several miles older than I. Now he was clearly younger and we had little in common.

Shortly after she had given birth Dorita left the city and I returned to my own guild.

Like the Future guildsmen I had seen as an apprentice, I was becoming a misfit in the city. I enjoyed my own company, relished those stolen hours in the north, was uncomfortable in the city. I had developed an interest in drawing, but told almost no one about it. I did my guild work as quickly and efficiently as possible, then rode off alone through the future countryside, sketching what I saw, trying to find in line drawings some expression of a terrain where time could almost stand still.

I watched the city from a distance, seeing it as something alien—not of this world, no longer even of me. Mile by mile it hauled itself forward, never finding or even seeking a final resting place.

Book Four

XXX

She waited in the doorway of the church while the discussion continued on the far side of the square. Behind her, in the temporary workshop, the priest and two assistants were working patiently at restoring the plaster image of the Virgin Mary. The church was cool and, in spite of the partly caved-in roof, clean and restful. She knew she shouldn't be here, but some instinct had sent her inside when the two men had arrived.

She watched them talking earnestly to Luiz Carvalho, the self-appointed leader of the village, and a handful of other men. In other times the priest, perhaps, would have assumed responsibility for the community, but Father dos Santos was, like herself, a newcomer.

The men had ridden into the village along the dried-up streambed and now their horses grazed while the discussion continued. She was too far away to hear the actual words, but it seemed to her that some deal was being struck. The men from the village talked volubly, feigning no interest, but she knew that if their attention had not been caught they would not still be talking.

It was the horsemen who held her interest. That they were not from any of the nearby villages was self-evident. Their appearance contrasted strikingly with that of the

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villagers—each wore a black cape, well-fitting trousers and leather boots. Their horses were saddled and apparently groomed and, though each carried large saddlebags loaded with equipment, they stood without apparent fatigue. No local horse was in such good condition.

Her curiosity began to override her instinct and she stepped forward to learn for herself what was going on. As she did so the negotiations appeared to have been completed, for the village men turned away and the other two returned to their horses.

They mounted immediately and headed back the way they had come. She stood and watched them, debating whether or not to follow.

When they disappeared among the trees that grew along the stream she ran between two of the houses and scrambled up the rise of ground behind the village. After a few moments she saw the men emerging from the trees. They drew rein and halted.

They conferred for about five minutes, several times looking back in the general direction of the village.

She kept out of sight, standing in the dense scrub that grew all over the hill. Suddenly one of the men raised his hand to the other and swung his horse around. He set off at a gallop in the direction of some distant hills—the other man turned his animal in the opposite direction and walked it at a leisured pace.

She returned to the village and found Luiz.

"What did they want?" she asked.

"They need men for some work."

"Did you agree to this?"

He looked evasive. "They're coming back tomorrow."

"Are they going to pay?"

"With food. Look."

He held out a handful of bread and she took it from him. It was brown and fresh and smelled good.

"Where did they get this?"

Luiz shrugged. "They also have other food."

"Did they give you any of that?"

"No."

She frowned, wondering again who the men might be.

"Anything else?"

"Only this." He showed her a small bag and she opened it. Inside was a coarse white powder and she sniffed at it.

"They said it would make fruit grow."

"They have more of this?"

"As much as we need."

She put the bag down and went back to the church workshop. After a word with Father dos Santos she walked quickly to the stables and saddled up her own horse.

She rode out of the village by way of the dried-up stream and followed in the direction of the second man.

Beyond the village stretched a wide area of scrubland dotted with trees. She soon saw the second man some distance ahead of her, still walking his horse toward denser woodland, beyond which a river flowed.

She kept her distance, not wish-

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ing to be seen until she found out where he was heading.

When he entered the woods she lost sight of him and dismounted. She led her horse by its reins, keeping a wary eye for any sign. Soon she could hear the sound of the river, shallow at this season, its bed noisy with pebbles.

She saw his horse first—it was tethered to a tree. She tied up her own animal and continued afoot. The air was warm and still under the trees and she felt dusty from the ride. She wondered suddenly what had prompted her to follow this man when reason warned her of any number of possible risks. But something about him—and his companion—was different from anything she had known.

She moved more cautiously as she approached the edge of the wood. Here she halted, looking down the shallow bank toward the water.

The man was there and she studied him with interest.

He had discarded his cloak. It lay with his boots beside a small pile of equipment. He had waded into the river, and was clearly relishing the coolness of the water. Completely oblivious of her presence, he kicked his feet in the water, sending up showers of glittering spray. In a moment he bent down, scooped up some water in his hands and splashed it over his face and neck.

He turned, waded out of the water and bent over his equipment on the shore. From a black leather case he took what seemed to her a small camera, suspended the case by its strap over his shoulder and connected it to the camera with a short lead. This done, he adjusted a small ferruled knob on the side.

He put down the camera for a moment and unfurled a long paper roll, wound like a scroll. He laid this on the ground, looked at it thoughtfully for a few seconds, then picked up the camera and returned to the water's edge.

Deliberately he pointed the camera upstream for a second or two, then lowered it and turned. He pointed it at the opposite bank and then, startling her, pointed it in her direction. She ducked down out of sight and from his lack of reaction guessed he had not seen her. When she looked again he was pointing the camera downstream.

He returned to the length of paper and with great care inscribed a few symbols.

Still moving deliberately, he put the camera back in its case, rolled up the paper and stowed it with the rest of the equipment.

He stretched elaborately, then scratched the back of his head. Listlessly he returned to the water's edge, sat down and dangled his feet in the water. In a moment he sighed and lay back, his eyes closed.

She regarded him closely. He certainly looked harmless enough. He was big, well-muscled, and his face and arms were deeply tanned. His hair was long and shaggy, a great mane of light auburn. He wore a beard. She estimated him to be somewhere in his middle thirties. In spite of the

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beard he had a clean-cut, youthful face, grinning at the simple animal bliss of cold wet feet on a hot dry day.

Flies hovered around his face and from time to time he would swipe at them lazily.

After a few more moments of hesitation she started forward and half-walked, half-skidded down the bank, pushing a minor avalanche of soil before her.

The man's reaction was immediate. He sat up, looked around sharply and scrambled to his feet. In so doing he turned awkwardly, and slipped down on his stomach, his feet thrashing in the water.

She started to laugh.

He recovered his foothold and dove for his equipment. A few seconds later he had a rifle in his hands.

She stopped laughing . . . but he did not raise the rifle.

Instead he said something in Spanish so bad that she could not understand him.

She spoke only a little Spanish herself, so she said in the language of the villagers, "I didn't mean to laugh."

He shook his head, then looked at her carefully. She spread her hands to prove that she carried no kind of weapon and gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. He seemed satisfied that she presented no threat to him and put down the rifle.

Again he said something in atrocious Spanish, then muttered a few words in English.

"Do you speak English?" she asked.

"Yes. Do you?"

"Like a native." She laughed again and asked, "Do you mind if I join you?"

She nodded toward the river, but he continued to stare dumbly at her. She slipped off her shoes and walked down to the water. She waded in, hitching up her skirt. The water was cold—it made her toes curl, but the sensation was delightful. In a moment she sat on the ground, keeping her feet in the water.

He came to sit beside her.

"Sorry about the gun. You startled me."

"I'm sorry, too," she said. "But you looked so blissful."

"To relax and cool off is the best thing to do on a day like this."

Together they stared down at the water flowing over their feet. Beneath the rippling surface white flesh seemed to flicker like a flame in a draft.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Helward."

"Helward?" She tried the sound of the word. "Is that a surname?"

"No. My full name is Helward Mann. What's yours?"

"Elizabeth. Elizabeth Khan. I don't like being called Elizabeth."

"I'm sorry."

She glanced at him. He looked very serious.

She was a little confused by his accent. She had realized he was not a native of this region and he spoke English naturally and without effort, but he had a strange way of pronouncing his vowels.

"Where do you come from?" she said.

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"Around here." He stood up suddenly. "I'd better water the animal."

He stumbled again as he climbed the bank, but this time Elizabeth did not laugh. He walked straight into the trees, did not pick up his equipment. The rifle was still there. He looked over his shoulder at her once and she turned away.

When he returned he was leading both horses. She stood up and led her mount to the water.

Standing between the horses, Elizabeth stroked the neck of Helward's.

"She's beautiful," she said. "Is she yours?"

"Not really. I just ride her more often than any of the others."

"What do you call her?"

"I—haven't given her a name. Should I?"

"Only if you want to. Mine hasn't got a name either."

"I enjoy riding," Helward said suddenly. "It's the best part of my work."

"That and paddling in rivers. What do you do?"

"I'm a . . . I mean, it hasn't really got a label. What about you?"

"I'm a nurse. Officially, that is. I do lots of things.

"We have nurses," he said. "In the—where I come from."

She looked at him with new interest. "Where's that?"

"A city. In the south."

"What's it called?"

"Earth. Although most of the time we just call it the city."

Elizabeth smiled uncertainly, not sure she had heard correctly. "Tell me about it."

He shook his head. The horses had finished drinking and were nuzzling each other.

"I think I'd better be on my way," he said.

He walked quickly toward his equipment, scooped it up and stuffed it hurriedly into the saddlebags. Elizabeth watched curiously. When he had finished he took the rein, turned the horse around and led it up the bank. At the fringe of the trees he looked back.

"I'm sorry. You must think me very rude. It's just that you're not like the others."

"The others?"

"The people around here."

"Is that so bad?"

"No." He looked around the riverside as if seeking some further excuse to stay with her. Abruptly he seemed to change his mind about leaving. He tethered the horse to the nearest tree. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"I wonder—would you let me draw you?"

"Draw me?"

"Yes—just a sketch. I'm not very good—I haven't been doing it very long. While I'm up here I spend a lot of time drawing what I see."

"Was that what you were doing before I came down? I saw you with some papers."

"That was just a map."

"All right. Do you want me to pose for you?"

He fumbled in his saddlebag,

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then brought out a sheaf of papers in assorted sizes. He flicked nervously through the sheets and she saw that some had line drawings on them.

"Just stand there," he said. "No—beside your horse."

He sat down on the edge of the bank, balancing the papers on his knees. She watched him, a little disconcerted by this sudden development, and felt a growing self-consciousness that was generally alien to her personality. He stared over the paper at her.

She stood by the horse, her arm reaching under its neck to pat the other side, and the horse responded by pressing its nose against her.

"You're standing wrong," he said. "Turn more toward me."

The self-consciousness grew and she realized she was standing in an unnatural, awkward posture.

He worked away, using one sheet of paper after the next, and she began to relax. She decided to pay no attention to him and petted the horse again. After a while he asked her to sit in the saddle, but she was growing tired.

"Can I see what you've done?"

"I never show my drawings to anyone."

"Please, Helward. I've never posed before."

He sifted through the papers and selected a few. "I don't know what you'll think."

She took them from him.

"God, am I as skinny as that?" she said without thinking.

He tried to take the drawings away from her. "Give them back."

She turned away from him and flicked through the rest. It was possible to see that they were of her, but his sense of proportion was—unusual. Both she and the horse were drawn too tall and thin. The effect was not unpleasing, but it was weird.

"Please—I'd like them back."

She gave them to him and he put them at the bottom of the pile. Abruptly he turned his back on her and walked toward his horse.

"Have I offended you?" she asked.

"It's all right. I knew I shouldn't have shown them to you."

"I think they're excellent. It's just—it's a bit of a shock to see yourself through someone else's eyes. I told you I had never posed before."

"You're difficult to draw."

"Could I see some of your others?"

"You wouldn't be interested."

"Look, I'm not just trying to smooth your ruffled feathers. I really am interested."

"Okay."

He gave her the whole pile and continued toward his horse. She sat down again and began to go through the drawings, aware of him in the background pretending to adjust the horse's harness, but in fact watching her covertly, trying to anticipate her response.

He had drawn a variety of subjects. There were several of his horse: grazing, standing, throwing back its head. These were amazingly naturalistic—with a few lines he had caught the very essence of the

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animal, proud yet docile, tamed yet still its own master. Curiously, the proportions were exactly right. There were several drawings of a man—self-portraits, or the man she had seen him with earlier? He was drawn in his cloak, without his cloak, standing by a horse, using the camera she had seen earlier. Again the proportions were almost exactly right.

A few sketches were of scenery—trees, a river, a curious structure being dragged by ropes, a distant range of hills. He was not as adept with views. Sometimes his proportions were good, at other times there was a disturbing distortion that she could not quite identify. Something wrong with the perspective? She couldn't tell.

At the bottom of the pile she found the drawings he had made of her. The first few were not very good, clearly his first attempts. Three of those he had shown her were by far the best, but there was still this elongation of her and the horse that puzzled her.

"Well?" he asked.

"I—" She couldn't find the right words. "I think they're good—some are unusual. You've an excellent eye."

"You're a difficult subject."

"I particularly like this one." She searched through the pile, found one of the horse with its mane flying wild. "It's lifelike."

He grinned then. "That's my own favorite."

She glanced again through the drawings. Something about a few of them she hadn't understood—there, in one of the drawings of the man. High in the background hung a weird, four-pointed shape. There was one in each of the sketches he had done of her.

"What's this?" she said, pointing to it.

"The sun."

She frowned a little, but decided not to pursue the subject. She felt she had done enough damage to his ego for the moment.

She selected what she thought was the best of the three.

"Could I have this one?"

"I thought you didn't like it."

"I do. I think it's marvelous."

He looked at her carefully, as if trying to divine whether she was being truthful, then again took the pile from her.

"Would you like this one, too?"

He handed her the one of the horse.

"I couldn't. Not that one."

"I'd like you to have it," he said. "You're the first person to have seen it."

"I—thank you."

He placed the papers carefully into the saddlebag and buckled the cover.

"Did you say your name was Elizabeth?"

"I prefer to be called Liz."

He nodded gravely. "Goodbye, Liz."

"Are you going?"

He didn't answer, but untethered the horse and swung into the saddle. He rode down the bank, splashed through the shallow water of the river and spurred his horse on up the opposite bank. In a few seconds he was lost to sight among the trees.

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Back at the village Elizabeth found she had no appetite for more work. She was still waiting for a consignment of proper medical supplies and a doctor had been promised for more than a month. She had done what she could to see that the villagers were getting a balanced diet—but food supplies were limited—and she had been able to deal with the more obvious ailments such as sores, rashes and so forth. Last week she had helped deliver a baby for one of the women and for the first time had felt she was accomplishing something.

Now, with the strange encounter by the river still fresh in her mind, she decided to return to headquarters early.

She found Luiz before she left.

"If those men come back," she said, "try to find out what it is they want. I'll be back in the morning. If they come before I arrive try to keep them here. Find out where they're from."

By the time she had covered the seven miles to headquarters it was evening. The place was almost deserted—many of the field operatives stayed out for several nights on end. Tony Chappell was there, though, and he intercepted her as she headed for her room.

"Are you free this evening, Liz? I thought we might—"

"I'm very tired. I thought I'd have an early night."

When she had first arrived Elizabeth had felt faint stirrings of attraction toward Chappell and had made the mistake of showing them. There were only a few women at the station and he had responded with great eagerness. Since then he had hardly left her alone and she hadn't yet discovered a polite way of cooling his ardor.

In her room she dumped her bag on the bed, undressed and took a long shower. Later she went to find something to eat and, inevitably, Tony joined her.

During the meal she remembered she had been meaning to ask him something.

"Do you know any towns around here called Earth?"

"Earth? Like the planet?"

"That's what it sounded like. I might have heard wrong."

He shook his head. "Whereabouts?"

"Somewhere around here. Not far."

"Urf? Or Mirth?" He laughed. "Are you sure?"

"No—not really. I think I must have gotten it wrong."

In his own inimitable way Tony continued to make poor jokes about what she might have heard until she found an excuse to get away.

There was a large map of the region in one of the offices, but she couldn't see anything that might sound like the town where Helward had said he lived. He had described it as a city lying in the south, but there was no large settlement for nearly sixty miles.

She was genuinely exhausted and returned to her room.

She undressed and took the two sketches Helward had given her and taped them to the wall by the bed. The one of her was so strange . . .

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She looked at it more closely. The paper he had used was evidently quite old, for its edges were yellowed. Looking at the edges, she realized that the top and bottom were slightly burred where they had been torn, but the line was quite straight.

Experimentally she ran the tip of her finger along it—the paper had been perforated.

Careful not to damage the drawing, she separated the tape from the wall and took down the sketch.

On the back she discovered that a column of numbers had been printed down one side. Some were asterisked.

Printed in pale blue ink along the side were the words: IBM Multifold TM.

She taped the sketch again to the wall—and stared at it uncomprehendingly for a long time.

IN THE morning Elizabeth put in another teleprinted request for a doctor, then set out for the village.

She arrived in the heat of the day to find the place steeped in listlessness and lethargy. She sought out Luiz, found him sitting in the shadow of the church with two other men.

She asked, "Have the strangers been back?"

"Not today, Menina Khan."

"When did they say they'd come again?"

Luiz shrugged. "Sometime. Today, tomorrow."

"Have you tried that—"

She stopped, irritated with herself. She had meant to take the purported fertilizer to headquarters to have it analyzed and in her preoccupaton had forgotten it.

"Let me know if they come."

She went to see Maria and her new baby, but her mind was not fully on her work. Later she supervised a meal, that was served to all comers, then talked to Father dos Santos in the workshop. All this time she had one ear cocked for any sound of horses.

No longer trying to make any excuses for herself, she went down to the stable, saddled up and rode out of the village, toward the river. She was trying not to dwell on her own thoughts, trying not to examine her own motives, but failed. The last twenty-four hours had been momentous in their own way. She had come out here to work because of a feeling that her life at home had been without meaning—only to find new frustrations among these impoverished villagers. What she could offer them was too little and too late. A few government handouts of grain, a few inoculations, a repaired church might be better than nothing—but the root of the local poverty problem remained unsolved because the central economy had failed. There was nothing on this land but what the people themselves could take.

The intrusion of Helward into her life was the first event of interest she had experienced since she arrived. She knew, as she rode across the scrubland toward the trees, that her motives regarding him were mixed. She admitted to curiosity—but something in the situation reached deeper.

The men stationed here—her co-

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workers—were obsessed with themselves and what they imagined their missions in life to be. They spoke in abstracts about group psychology, social readjustment, patterns of behavior—in her more cynical moods she found their self-important outlook pathetic. Apart from the unfortunate Tony Chappell, she had formed no kind of interest in any of them—which was not at all as she had anticipated before she arrived.

Helward was different. She refrained from spelling it out to herself, but she knew why she was riding out to find him.

She found their yesterday's meeting place on the riverbank and allowed her horse to drink. Then she tethered it in the shade and sat down at the water's edge to wait. Again she tried to blank out the turmoil of mental activity: thoughts, desires, questions. Concentrating hard on the physical environment, she lay back on the bank in the sunshine and closed her eyes. She listened to the sound of the water as it ran over the pebbles, the sigh of the wind in the trees, the humming of insects. She inhaled the smell of dry undergrowth, hot soil, warmth.

A long time passed. Behind her the horse whisked its tail every few seconds, patiently flicking away swarming flies.

She opened her eyes as soon as she heard the sound of the other horse and sat up.

Helward sat his mount on the opposite bank. He raised his hand in greeting and she waved back.

He dismounted immediately and she smiled to herself. He seemed in high spirits and tried a handstand to amuse her. After two attempts he made it, then toppled over and landed with a shout and a splash in the river.

Elizabeth jumped up and ran through the shallow water toward him.

"Are you all right?"

He grinned at her. "I could do that when I was a kid."

"So could I."

He stood up, looking down ruefully at his soaked clothes.

"They'll soon dry," she said.

"I'll get my horse."

They splashed across to her side of the river and Helward stood his horse next to Elizabeth's. She sat down on the bank again and Helward came to sit close beside her, stretching out his legs in the sun so that his clothes might dry.

Behind them the horses stood nose to tail, whisking flies.

Questions, questions—but she suppressed them all. She enjoyed the intrigue, didn't want to destroy it with understanding. The rational explanation would be that he was an operative from a station similar to hers and that he was enjoying an elaborate and somewhat pointless joke at her expense. She didn't care—his presence was enough and she was herself sufficiently emotionally suppressed to relish the break with routine he was bringing her.

The only common bond between them that she knew of was that she was the only person to whom he had shown his sketches and she

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asked to see them again. For a while they talked about the drawings and he spoke of his various enthusiasms—she was interested to see that all the sketches were on the back of old computer printout paper.

Eventually he said, "I thought you were a took."

He pronounced it with a long vowel, like "shoot."

"What's that?"

"One of the people who live around here. But they don't speak English."

"A few do. Not very well. Only when we teach them."

"Who is 'we'?"

"The people I work for."

"You're not from the city—" he said suddenly, then looked away.

Elizabeth felt a glimmer of alarm. He had looked and acted like this the day before and then he had suddenly left. She didn't want that now.

"Do you mean your city?"

"No—of course you're not. Who are you?"

"You know my name," she said.

"Yes, but where are you from?"

"England. I came here about two months ago."

"England—that's on Earth, isn't it?" He was staring at her intently, the drawings forgotten now.

She laughed, a nervous reaction to the strangeness of the question.

"It was the last time I was there," she said, trying to make a joke of it.

"My God! Then—"

"What?"

He stood up abruptly and turned away from her. He took a few steps, then turned again and stood over her, staring down.

"You've come from Earth?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you from Earth—the planet?"

"Of course—I don't understand."

"You're looking for us," he said.

"No! I mean—I'm not sure."

"You've found us!"

She stood up, backed away from him.

SHE waited beside the horses. The aura of strangeness had become one of madness and she knew she should leave. The next move must come from him.

"Elizabeth—don't go."

"Liz," she said.

"Liz—do you know who I am? I'm from the city of Earth. You must know what that means."

"No, I don't."

"You haven't heard about us?"

"No."

"We've been here for thousands of miles—many years. Nearly two hundred."

"Where is the city?"

He waved his arm in a northeast direction. "Down there. About twenty-five miles to the south."

She didn't react to the contradiction of direction, assumed he had made a mistake.

"May I see the city?" she said.

"Of course!" He took her hand excitedly and placed it on the rein of her horse. "We'll go now."

"Wait. How do you spell the name of your city?"

He spelled it for her.

"Why is it called that?"

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"I don't know. Because we are from the planet Earth, I suppose."

"Why do you differentiate between the two?"

"Because—isn't it obvious?"

"No."

She realized she was humoring him as if he were a maniac, but only excitement shone in his eyes, not madness. Her instinct, though, on which she had been so dependent recently, warned her to be careful. She could not be sure of anything now.

"But this is not Earth," he said.

She said, "Helward—meet me here tomorrow. By the stream."

"I thought you wanted to see our city."

"Yes—but not today. If it is twenty-five miles away I would have to get a fresh horse, tell my superiors." She was making excuses.

He looked at her uncertainly.

"You think I'm making it up," he said.

"No."

"Then what's wrong? I tell you, as long as I can remember and for many years before I was born the city has survived in the hope that help would come from Earth. Now you are here and you think I am mad—"

"You are on Earth."

He opened his mouth, closed it again.

"Why do you say that?" he said.

"Why should I say otherwise?"

He took her arm again and whirled her round. He pointed upward.

"What do you see?"

She shielded her eyes against the glare. "The sun."

"The sun! The sun! What about the sun?"

"Nothing. Let go of my arm—you're hurting me!"

He released her and scrambled over to the discarded drawings. He took the top one, held it out for her to see.

"That is the sun!" he shouted, pointing at the weird shape drawn at the top right of the picture, a few inches from the spindly figure he had said was she. "There is the sun!"

Heart beating furiously she untied her horse, climbed into the saddle and kicked in her heels. The horse wheeled and she rode away at a gallop.

Helward stood looking after her, still holding out his drawing.

XXXII

It was evening by the time Elizabeth reached the village—the hour was too late for her to set out for headquarters. She had no will to return there anyway and there was a place in the village where she could sleep.

The main street was empty of people—unusual, for this early evening hour was a popular one with the people for sitting in the dust utside their houses and talking idly while they drank the strong resinous wine that was all they could ferment around here.

Sounds were coming from the church and she headed that way. Most of the men of the village were gathered inside—and few of the women.

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One or two girls were crying.

"What's going on?" Elizabeth asked Father dos Santos.

"Those men came back," he said. "They've offered a deal."

He was standing well to one side, obviously incapable of influencing the people in any way.

Elizabeth tried to catch the gist of the discussion, but there was much shouting and even Luiz, who stood prominently near the wrecked altar, could not make himself heard over the hubbub. Elizabeth caught his eye and he came to her at once.

"Well?"

"The men came today, Menina Khan. We are agreeing to their terms."

"It doesn't sound like there's much agreement. What are their terms?"

"Fair."

He started to head back toward the altar, but Elizabeth caught his arm.

"What did they want?" she said.

"They will give us many medicines and a lot of food. There is more of the fertilizer and they say they will help repair the church, though that is not wished by us."

He was looking at her evasively, his gaze flickering up to her eyes, then away, then back again.

"And in return?"

"Only a little."

"Come on, Luiz. What did they want?"

"Ten of our women. Is nothing."

She stared at him in amazement. "What did you—"

"They will be well looked after. They will make them healthy, and when they return to us they will bring more food."

"And what do the women say to that?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "They are not happy."

"I'll bet they're not." She looked at the six women present. They stood in a small group and the men nearest to them looked sheepish. "What do they want them for?"

"We do not ask."

"Because you think you know." She turned to dos Santos. "What's going to happen?"

"They've already made up their minds," he said.

"But why? Surely they can't seriously consider trading their wives and daughters for a few sacks of grain?"

Luiz said, "We need what they offer."

"But we have already promised you food. There is a doctor on his way now."

"Yes—and so you have promised. Two months you have been here and very little food, no doctor. These men are honorable. We can tell."

He returned to face the crowd. In a moment he called for a vote by show of hands. The deal was confirmed. None of the women voted.

ELIZABETH passed a restless night, but by the time she rose in the morning she knew what she was going to do.

The day had produced a volume of unexpected developments. Ironically, the one of which she had felt instinctively confident had not materialized. Now that her encounter

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with Helward had taken on a new perspective, she could put words to what she had expected: the stirring inside her had been a physical restlessness, and she had ridden down to the river in full expectation of being seduced by him. It could have happened, she now knew, until the moment the fanatical expression had seized his eyes. She still experienced stirrings of what she had felt—not fear, not amazement, but something between—during the last shouted conversation under the trees.

What about the sun?

Undoubtedly there had been more to the scene than she had grasped. Helward's behavior the day before had been different—she had tapped a hidden sensitivity and he had responded the way any man would. He had shown no sign of madness then.

Some mystery was attached to his use of computer paper. She knew of only one computer within a thousand miles of here and she also knew where it was and what it was used for. It didn't use paper printouts, and it certainly wasn't an IBM. She knew of IBMs—anyone trained in the basics of computers had heard of them, but no machine had been made by IBM since the Crash. Certainly the only ones intact, if not working, were in museums.

Finally, the deal proposed by the men who had visited the village had been wholly unanticipated, at least by her. Although, remembering Luiz's expression after he had first spoken to the men, she felt sure that he had had from the start at least an inkling of what had been expected by way of payment.

Somehow all must be connected. She knew the men who had come to the village were from the same place as Helward—and that his behavior was linked in some way to this deal.

There remained the question of her own involvement.

Technically, the village and its people were the responsibility of her and dos Santos. Headquarters was primarily interested in overseeing the repair of a big harbor on the coast—only once had a supervisor visited the village. In theory Elizabeth was in the charge of dos Santos, but he was a local man who had been one of the several hundred students who had been rushed through the government theological college in an effort to take religion back to the outlying regions. Religion was the traditional opiate here and missionary work was given a high priority in government circles. But the facts of the situation spoke for themselves: dos Santos's work would take years and for most of the early ones he would be working uphill toward reestablishing the church as the social and spiritual leader of the community. The villagers tolerated him, but it was of Luiz they took notice—and, to a certain extent, of herself.

If any action were to be taken it would have to be on her own initiative.

The decision did not come quickly. Throughout that long, warm night she did what she could to separate the pros and cons, the risks and the benefits, and however she

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looked at it her chosen course of action seemed to be the only one.

She rose early and went down to Maria's house. She had to be quick—the men had said they would be coming soon after sunrise.

Maria was awake—her baby was crying. She knew of the decision taken the night before and she questioned Elizabeth about it.

"We'll talk about it some other time," Elizabeth said. "Right now I want to trade clothes with you."

"But yours are so beautiful—"

"I want something of yours—to play a joke on a friend. Anything will do."

Maria found a selection of rough garments and laid them out for Elizabeth's inspection. They were worn and probably had never seen soap and water. For Elizabeth's purpose they were ideal. She selected a ragged, loose-fitting skirt and an off-white shirt that had presumably once belonged to one of the men. She slipped out of her own clothes and pulled on Maria's.

Maria said, "But you look no better than a village girl—"

"Right." Elizabeth examined the crying baby, found nothing wrong with it beyond a touch of colic. She went over with Maria the daily routine she should follow to keep the infant comfortable. Maria, as always, pretended to listen, although she would forget everything as soon as she was left alone. Had she not reared three children already?

Walking barefoot up the dusty street, Elizabeth wondered if she truly would pass for one of the village women. She shook her hair into disarray—it was long and brown and she was deeply tanned. She tried to modify her posture as she walked to conceal the fact that she looked—and was—better fed than the village women.

A small group of people already waited in the square in front of the church and more were arriving by the minute. Luiz was at the center of everything, trying to persuade some women who were simply watching to return to their homes. Beside him stood several girls—the youngest and the most attractive adult females in the village, Elizabeth realized with a feeling of disgust. By the time she reached the group she counted ten of them.

Luiz recognized her at once.

"Menina Khan—"

"Luiz, who is the youngest of these?"

He seemed reluctant to answer, so she picked out one she knew to be no older than fourteen.

"Lea," she said, "go back to your mother. I will go instead."

Unsurprised and uncomplaining, the girl walked mutely away. Luiz stared at Elizabeth for a moment, then shrugged.

The wait was not long. In a few minutes three men appeared, each riding a horse and each leading another. All six horses were laden with packages and without ceremony the riders dismounted and unloaded the materials they had brought.

Luiz watched keenly. Elizabeth heard one of the men say to him, "We'll be back in two days with the rest. Do you want the work done on the church?"

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"No—we do not need that."

"As you wish. Do you want to change any of the terms of the barter?"

"No. We are satisfied."

"Good." The stranger turned and faced the rest of the people who were watching the transaction. He spoke to them as he had spoken to Luiz, in their own language, but with a heavy accent. "We have tried to be men of good will and good word. Some of you may not be in favor of the terms we have proposed, but we ask your understanding. The women you have let us borrow will be cared for and will not be treated badly in any way. Their health and happiness are in our interests as much as yours. We shall see that they return to you as soon as possible. Thank you."

The ceremony was over. The men offered the horses to the women to ride. Two of the girls climbed onto one horse, and five more took a horse each. Elizabeth and the two others elected to walk and soon the small party left the village.

THROUGHOUT the journey Elizabeth maintained silence. The three men spoke to each other in English, assuming that none of the girls would be able to understand them. Elizabeth listened intently, hoping to learn something of interest, but mostly she heard complaints about the heat, the lack of shade and how long the journey would take.

The men's concern for the women seemed genuine enough. Every hour or so brought a rest stop and the women were given turns riding the horses. None of the men rode for any part of the way and in time Elizabeth began to sympathize with their complaints. If their destination was, as Helward had said, twenty-five miles away, it was a long walk on a hot day.

Later in the day the men's inhibitions seemed to relax, perhaps as fatigue reached them.

One asked, "Do you think all this is still necessary?"

"The barters?"

"Yes—I mean, they've caused trouble in the past."

"What would you suggest we do instead?"

"I don't know. Not my decision. If I had my way I wouldn't be out here now."

"This time still makes sense to me. The last women haven't moved out yet and there's no sign of their doing so. Maybe we won't have to barter any more."

"We will."

"You sound as if you don't approve."

"Frankly, I don't. Sometimes I think the whole system's crazy."

"You've been listening to the Terminators."

"Maybe I have. If you listen to them they make a bit of sense. Not that they have all the answers, but they're not as bad as the Navigators make out."

"You're out of your mind."

"Okay. Who wouldn't be in this heat?"

"You'd better not repeat what you just said in the city."

"Why not? Enough people are saying it already."

"Not guildsmen. You've been

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down past. You know what's what."

"I'm just being realistic. You've got to listen to people's opinions. There are more people in the city who want to stop than there are guildsmen. That's all."

"Shut up, Norris," said the man who had so far not spoken, the one who had addressed the crowd in the village.

The men's conversation, what there was of it, returned to the immediacies.

THE city had been in sight for some time before Elizabeth recognized it for what it was. As they came nearer she looked at it with great interest, not comprehending the system of tracks and cables that stretched away from it. Her first assumption was that it was some kind of marshaling yard, but she saw no sign of any rolling stock and anyway the length of track was too short for any practical use.

Later she noticed several men apparently patrolling the tracks. Each carried either a rifle or what appeared to be a crossbow. More than this she could not absorb, since most of her attention was on the structure itself.

She had heard the men refer to it as a city—as had Helward—but to her eyes it was not much more than a large and misshapen office block. Constructed mainly of timber, it had the ugliness of functionalism and yet there was a simplicity to its design she found not altogether unattractive. She was reminded of pictures she had seen of pre-Crash buildings, and although most of those had been steel and reinforced concrete they shared the squareness, the plainness and lack of exterior decoration. Those old buildings had been tall, though, and this strange structure was at no point more than seven stories high. The timber showed varying stages of weathering. Most of what she could see had been well bleached by the elements, but newer construction was visible.

The women were led into a dark passageway at the base of the building. Here they dismounted and were taken up a staircase and through a doorway. They emerged into a brightly lit corridor.

At the end of it was another door and here their escorts left them. A printed sign on the door read: TRANSFER QUARTERS.

Inside they were greeted by two women, who spoke to them in the badly accented language of the people.

ONCE ELIZABETH had adopted her pose she could find no way of abandoning it. In the next few days she was subjected to a series of examinations and treatments which, had she not suspected the reason, she would have found humiliating. She was bathed and her hair was washed. She was medically examined—her eyes were tested, her teeth checked. Her hair and scalp were inspected for infestation and she was given a test she could only imagine was to determine whether or not she had VD.

Without surprise, the women supervising the examination passed

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her with a clean bill of health and she was then given over to two more women who began to instruct her in the rudiments of English. In spite of her best efforts to delay the learning process until she could discover more than she had already guessed about what was in store for her, she was soon considered fit and educated enough to be released from this initial period of habilitation.

The first few nights she had slept in a communal dormitory in the transfer center, but now she was given a tiny room of her own. This was scrupulously clean and furnished minimally. It contained a narrow bed, a space to hang her clothes—she had been given two identical sets of clothes to wear—a chair and about four square feet of floor space.

Eight days had passed since her arrival and Elizabeth was beginning to wonder what she had hoped to achieve. She was assigned to the kitchens, where the work she was given was straightforward drudgery. The evenings were free, but she was told that she was expected to spend at least an hour or two in a certain reception room where, she was told, she was supposed to mix socially with the people she met there.

This room had a small bar at one end offering a limited choice of beverages. Entertainment was provided by an ancient video set. When she switched it on a tape device attached to it showed a comedy program that she failed to appreciate, although an invisible audience laughed all the way through. The comic allusions were evidently contemporary to some earlier period and fairly meaningless to her. She watched the program through and from a copyright notice at the end learned that it had been taped in 1985. More than two hundred years ago.

She met only a few people here. A woman from the transfer center tended the bar. A few men came in occasionally—dressed, as Helward had been, in the dark uniform—and sometimes two or three women who, like herself, were from outside the city.

ONE DAY, working in the kitchen, she accidentally solved a problem that had continued to nag at her.

She was stacking away clean crockery when something about the metal cupboard caught her attention. It had been changed almost out of recognition—its components had been removed and it had been fitted with wooden shelves—but the IBM lettering on one of the doors still showed through the covering layer of paint.

When she could seize the opportunity she explored the rest of the city. Her movements were not restricted beyond the hours required by the performance of her duties. She talked to people, she learned, she thought.

One day she came across a small room set aside for use by the residents of the city during leisure moments. Lying on a table she found a few sheets of printed paper, neatly stapled together. She glanced at

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them without much interest, saw the title on the first page: *Destaine's Directive.*

Later, as she walked through the city she saw many more of these printed sheets and in due time, her curiosity piqued, she read one set through. Having seen its contents, she immediately concealed a copy in the bedclothes of her bunk, meaning to take it with her when she left.

She was beginning to understand. She returned again to Destaine, read his words so often they became almost photographically recorded on her brain. She thought about Helward and his apparently wild behavior and words.

She tried to remember what he had said and in time, a kind of logical pattern appeared.

The hypothesis by which the city and its people existed was that the world on which they lived was somehow inverted. Not only the world, but all the physical objects in the universe in which that world was presumed to exist. The shape that Destaine drew—a solid world, curved north and south in the shape of hyperbolae—was the approximation they used. And it correlated indeed with the strange shape that Helward had drawn to depict the sun.

One day Elizabeth saw the flaw, as she walked through one of the parts of the city presently being rebuilt.

She glanced up at the sun, shielding her eyes with her hand. The sun was as she had ever known it—a brilliant white ball of light high in the sky.

XXXIII

ELIZABETH planned to leave the city the following morning—she would steal a horse and ride back to the village. From there she could get back to headquarters and take some leave shortly due to her. Four weeks would give her plenty of time to get back to England and check out what she thought she had discovered.

She spent the rest of the day following routine and in the evening went to the reception room. And the first man she saw when she walked through the doorway was Helward.

"Hello, Helward," she said quietly.

He turned to acknowledge her, then looked at her in disbelief.

"You?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't give me away—I'm not supposed to be able to speak English very well," she whispered. "I'm one of your transferred women." She led him out of easy earshot of others in the room. "Look," she said. "I'm sorry about the last time we met. I understand better now."

"And I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"Have you said anything about me to anyone here?"

"About your being from Earth? No."

"Good. then don't."

He asked, "Are you really from Earth planet?"

"Yes, but I wish you wouldn't phrase it like that. I'm from Earth—and so are you. There's a misunderstanding."

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"God—I've begun to see that." He looked down at her from the nine-inch advantage he had in height. "You look different here—but what are you doing as a transfer?"

"It was the only way I could think of getting into the city."

"I would have brought you." He glanced around the room. "Have you paired up with any of the men yet?"

"No."

"Don't." As he talked he kept looking over his shoulder. "Have you got a room to yourself? We could talk better."

"Yes. Shall we go?"

She closed the door when they were in her cubicle. The walls were thin, but could afford privacy. She sat in the chair, Helward on the edge of the bed.

"I've read Destaine," she said. "It was fascinating. I've heard of him somewhere. Who was he?"

"The founder of the city."

"Yes, I gathered that. But he was known for something else."

Helward looked blank. "Did what he write make any sense to you?"

"A little. Enough for me to understand that he was lost—and—wrong."

"Wrong about what?"

"The city and the danger it was in. He writes as if he and the others had somehow been transported to another world."

"That's so."

Elizabeth shook her head. "You've never left Earth, Helward. As I sit here and talk to you now—we're both on Earth."

He shook his head. "You're the one who's wrong. I know you are. Destaine knew the true situation. We are on another world."

Elizabeth said, "The other day you drew me with the sun behind me. You drew it like a hyperbola. Is that how you see it? You drew me too tall. Is that how you see me?"

"That's not how I *see* the sun, that's how it *is*. And it is how the world is. You I drew tall, because that's how I saw you then. We were a long way north of the city. Now . . . It's too difficult to explain. I could never make you understand."

"Try it."

"No."

"All right. Do you know how I see the sun? I see it as a sperical object of light—not as you do. I see myself as tall some miles 'north'—or what you call 'north'—of here as I am here. It's a question of what we subjectively perceive. Your senses inform you otherwise—I don't understand why, but Destaine's perception was wrong, too. It's always been wrong."

"Liz, it's more than perception. I've seen, felt, *lived* in this world. Whatever you say, it's real to me. I'm not alone. Most of the people in the city carry the same knowledge. It started with Destaine because he was there at the beginning. We've survived here a long time simply because of that knowledge. It's been at the root of everything and it's kept us alive, because without it we would not keep the city moving."

Elizabeth started to say some-

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thing, but he carried on. "Liz, after I saw you the other day I needed time to think. I rode north, a long way north. I saw something there that is going to test the city's capacity for survival as it has never been tested before. Meeting you was—I don't know—more than I had expected. But it led indirectly to a much bigger thing."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell anyone, except the Navigators. They've declared the information restricted for the moment. It would be a bad time for the news to get out."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you heard of the Terminators?"

"Yes, but I don't know who or what they are."

"They're a political group in the city. They've been trying to get the city to stop. If this news leaked out at this moment there'd be a lot of trouble. We've just survived a major crisis and the Navigators don't want another."

Elizabeth stared at him without saying anything. She had suddenly seen herself in a new light.

She was at an interface of two realities—one was hers, one was his. However close they came together there could be no contact between them. The why of it was something she still had to discover, but like the graph-line Destaine had drawn to approximate the reality he perceived, the nearer she came to him in one sense the farther she moved away in another. Somehow, she had drawn herself into this drama where one logic failed in the face of another and she knew she was incapable of dealing with it.

Persuaded as she was by Helward's sincerity and the manifest existence of the city and its people—and further by the apparently strange concepts around which they had made their survival—she could not eradicate from her mind the basic contradiction. The city and its people existed on Earth—the Earth she knew—and whatever she saw, whatever Helward said, there was no way around this. Evidence to the contrary made no sense.

But when the interface was challenged there was an impasse.

ELIZABETH said, "I'm going to leave the city tomorrow."

"Come with me. I'm going north again."

"No. I've got to get back to the village."

"Is that the one where they bartered for the women?"

"Yes."

"I'm going that way. We'll ride together."

Another impasse: the village lay southwest of the city. She said nothing.

He asked, "Why did you come to the city, Liz? You're not one of the local women."

"I wanted to see you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. You frightened me, but I saw other men who seemed to be like you trading with the village people. I wanted to find out

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what was going on. Now I wish I hadn't—because you still frighten me."

"I'm not raving at you again, am I?"

She laughed—and realized it was for the first time since she came to the city.

"No, of course not," she said. "It's more—I can't say. Everything I take for granted is different here. There must be a reason—a real physical one. Some of this could be in the mind, but not all. We are on the same planet and its name is Earth—that I know. But the city—not even your city—can't be the sole goal of all human existence. A million other things are important in our world, and survival is undoubtedly a drive, but not the primary one. I've been outside the city, Helward, a long way outside the city. Whatever else you may think, this place is not the center of the universe."

"It is," he said. "Because if we ever stopped believing that we would all die."

LEAVING the city presented Elizabeth with no problems. She went down to the stables with Helward and another man, whom he introduced as Future Blayne. They collected three horses and rode in a direction Helward declared was north. Again she questioned his sense of direction—by her reckoning of the position of the sun the true direction was toward the southwest—but she made nothing of it. By this time she was so accustomed to his affronts to what she considered logic that she saw no point in disputing his—and the city's—position. She was content to accept the ways of the city—even if she didn't understand them—as long as they got her where she wanted to go.

As they rode out Helward pointed out the great wheels on which the city was mounted and explained that the forward motion was so slow as to be almost undetectable. However, he assured her, the city moved about one mile every ten days. Northward—or toward the southwest, whichever way she cared to think of it.

The journey took two days. Helward and Future Blayne talked a lot, although not much made sense to her. She felt that she had suffered an overload of new information, and could absorb no more.

On the evening of the first day they passed within a mile or so of her village and she told Helward she wanted to drop out.

"No, come with us. You can go back later."

She said, "I want to go back to England. I think I can help you."

"You ought to see this first."

"What is it?"

"We're not sure," said Blayne. "Helward thinks you might be able to tell us."

She argued a little longer, but in the end went with them.

She thought it strange that she succumbed so readily. The interface remained a problem—yet she could identify with these people. The society within the city was curiously civilized in a countryside that had been wasted by anarchy

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for generations. Even in the few weeks she had been in the village the peasant outlook, the unquestioning lethargy, the inability to cope with even the most minor of problems had sapped her will to meet the challenge of her work. But the people of Helward's city were of a different order. Evidently they were some offshoot community that had somehow managed to preserve itself during the Crash and now lived on as if nothing had changed—except that they believed they had moved to another planet.

She had by her own actions involved herself in the affairs of their community. The consequences of her abandoning the village would have to be faced later—she could justify her immediate absence by saying she wanted to know where the women were being taken—but she felt now that she must follow this through. Ultimately some official body would have to rehabilitate the people of the city, but until then she was on the spot.

THEY spent the night under canvas. There were only two tents and the men gallantly offered her one of them for her own use—but before that they spent a long time talking.

Helward had evidently told Blayne about her and how she differed—as he saw her—from both the people of the city and the people of the villages.

Blayne spoke directly to her before she turned in—Helward stayed in the background. By and large Blayne affirmed what she had learned. He spoke of Destaine and his directive, of the city and its need to move forward—and he talked of the shape of the world. She had learned not to argue with the city outlook and she listened.

When she eventually crawled into her sleeping bag she was exhausted from the long ride through the day, but sleep came slowly. The interface had hardened. But her understanding of the city people's logic had been deepened.

They lived, Blayne said, on a world where the laws of nature were not what they were on Earth. She was prepared to believe him—or rather, to believe that he was sincere.

She had faith in the world that was.

Whatever it was.

EMERGING from woodland the trio encountered a region of coarse scrubland—there were no tracks here and progress was slow. A cool, steady wind was blowing.

Gradually the vegetation gave way to a hard, tough grass growing in sandy soil. Neither of the men said anything. Helward in particular stared ahead as he rode, letting his horse find its own route.

Elizabeth saw that ahead of them the vegetation gave way altogether and, as they breasted a ridge of loose sand and gravel, only some bare and scattered dunes lay between them and the beach. Her horse, which had already sensed the salt in the air, responded readily to the kick of her heels and

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broke into a canter. For a few heady minutes she exulted in the freedom and joy of galloping along a beach with the wind from the ocean filling her lungs.

Helward and Blayne had ridden down to the beach behind her, and now stood close together by their horses, looking out across the water.

She trotted her horse over to them, and dismounted.

"Does it extend east and west?" said Blayne.

"As far as I explored. There's no way around I could see."

Blayne took a camera from one of his packs, connected it to its case and panned it slowly across the view.

"We'll have to survey east and west," he said. "The water would be impossible to cross at this point."

"There's no sign of an opposite bank."

Blayne frowned at the beach. "I don't like the soil. We'll have to get the bridge people here. I don't think this sand would take the weight of the city."

"There must be some way."

The two men entirely ignored her. Helward erected a small instrument, a tripodal device with a concentric chart suspended by three catches below the fulcrum. He hung a plumbline over the chart, and took some kind of reading from it.

"We're a long way from optimum," he said eventually. "We've got plenty of time. Thirty miles—almost a year of city time. Do you think it could be done?"

"A bridge? It would take some doing. We'd need more men than we've got at the moment. What did the Navigators say?"

"Check what I reported. Do you check?"

"Yes. I can't see that I can add anything."

Helward stared for a few seconds longer at the expanse of water, then seemed to remember Elizabeth. He turned to her.

"What do you say?"

"About this? What do you expect me to say?"

"Tell us about our perceptions," said Helward. "Tell us there's no river here."

She said, "It's not a river."

Helward glanced at Blayne.

"You heard her," he said. "We're imagining it."

Elizabeth closed her eyes, turned away. She could no longer confront the interface.

The breeze was chilling her, so she took a blanket from her horse and moved back to the sandy ridge. When she faced the men again they were paying no attention to her. Helward had erected another instrument and was taking readings from it. He called them out to Blayne, his voice whipped thin by the wind.

They worked slowly and painstakingly, each checking the other's reading at every step. After an hour, Blayne packed some of the equipment on his horse, mounted and rode along the coast in a northerly direction. Helward stood and watched him go, his posture revealing a deep and overwhelming despair.

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Elizabeth interpreted it as a tiny weakness in the barrier that lay between them. Clutching the blanket around her, she walked down across the dunes toward him.

She asked, "Do you want to know where you are?"

He didn't turn.

"No," he said. "It doesn't matter."

"Portugal. This country is called Portugal. It's in Europe."

She moved around so that she could see his face. For a moment his gaze rested on her, but his expression was blank. He shook his head and walked past her toward his horse. The barrier was absolute.

Elizabeth went to her own animal and mounted it. She walked it along the beach and soon moved inland, heading back in the general direction of headquarters. In a few minutes the troubled blue of the Atlantic was out of sight.

Book Five

XXXIV

THE storm raged all night and none of us got much sleep. Our camp was a half-mile from the bridge and as the waves came crashing in the sound reached us as a dull, muted roar, almost obliterated by the howling gale. In our imaginations, at least, we heard the splintering of timber in every temporary lull.

Toward dawn the wind abated and we were able to sleep. Not for long, for soon after sunrise the kitchen was manned and we were given our food. No one talked as we ate. There could be only one topic of conversation and no one wished to speak of that.

We set off toward the bridge. We had gone only fifty yards when someone pointed to a piece of broken timber lying washed up on the shore. It was a grim omen and, as it turned out, an accurate one. Nothing was left of the bridge beyond the four main piles that were planted in the solid ground near the water's edge.

I glanced at Lerouex who, for this shift, was in charge of all operations.

"We need more timber," he said. "Barter Norris—take thirty men and start felling trees."

I waited for Norris's reaction. Of all the guildsmen on the site he had been the most reluctant to work and had complained loudly and long during the early stages of the work. Now he showed no rebellion—we were all past that. He simply nodded to Lerouex, picked a body of men and headed back toward the camp to collect the tree-felling tools.

"So we start again," I said to Lerouex.

"Of course."

"Will this one be strong enough?"

"If we build it properly."

He turned away and started to organize the clearing up of the site. In the background the waves, still huge in the aftermath of the storm, crashed against the land.

We worked all day and by evening the site had been cleared and Norris and his men had hauled

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fourteen tree trunks to the spot. The next morning we could again start building.

During the evening I sought out Lerouex. He was sitting alone in his tent, apparently checking through his designs of the bridge but in fact his stare was vacant.

He did not seem pleased to see me, but he and I were the two senior men on the site and he knew I would not have come without purpose. We were now of roughly equal age—by the nature of my work in the north I had passed many subjective years. It was a matter of some discomfort between us that he was the father of my former wife and that we were now contemporaries. Neither of us had ever referred directly to the matter. Victoria herself was still only a comparatively few miles older than she had been when we were married and the gulf between us was now so wide that even the memories we shared had become totally irretrievable.

"I know what you've come to say," he said. "You're going to tell me that we can never build a bridge."

"It's going to be difficult," I said.

"Impossible is what you mean."

"What do you think?"

"I'm supposed to build bridges, Helward, not think."

"That's crap and you know it."

"All right. But when a bridge is needed, I build it. I don't ask questions."

I said, "You've always had an opposite bank."

"That makes no difference. We can build with pontoons."

"And when we're mid-river, where do we get the timber? Where do we plant the cable stays?" I sat down to face him, unbidden. "You guessed wrong, incidentally. I didn't come to tell you the job was impossible."

"Well?"

"The opposite bank," I said. "Where is it?"

"Out there somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"How do you know there is one?"

"There must be."

"We still have to know where we're aiming," I said. "We're striking away from this shore a few degrees from perpendicular, but even so we should know where we expect to rejoin land. The curvature—"

"Is concave. I know. Don't you think I haven't thought about that? In theory we can see for ever. What about atmospheric haze? Twenty or thirty miles is all we can see with any accuracy even on a clear day."

"You're going to build a bridge thirty miles long?"

"I don't think we'll have to," he said. "I think we're going to be okay. Why else do you think I persevere?"

I shook my head. "I've no idea."

He said, "Did you know they're going to make me a Navigator? The last time I was in the city we had a long conference. The general feeling is that the water might not be as wide as it appears. Remember, north of optimum dimensions are distorted linearly north and south. It's obvious that this is a major

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crossing but reason demands that there's an opposite shore. The Navigators think that when the movement of the ground takes the crossing as far as optimum we should be able to see the opposite bank. Granted, it might then still be too wide to cross safely—but all we need to do is continue waiting. The farther south the ground takes us the narrower the river will become. A bridge will eventually be feasible."

"That's a hell of a risk," I said. 'The centrifugal force could tear the city apart."

"I know."

"And what if the opposite bank doesn't appear before that?"

"Helward, it has to."

"You know that there's an alternative," I said.

"I've heard what the men have been saying. We can abandon the city and build a ship. I could never approve that."

"Guild pride?"

"No." His face reddened. "Practicalities. We couldn't build one large enough or safe enough."

"We're having the same difficulty with the bridge."

"I know—but we understand bridges. Who in the city would know how to design a ship? Anyway, we're learning by our mistakes. We just have to keep building until the bridge is strong enough."

"And time's running out."

"How far north of optimum are we?"

"Less than twelve miles."

"That's a hundred and twenty days of city time," he said. "How long do we have up here?"

"Subjectively about twice that."

"That's plenty."

I stood up, headed for the tent flap. I was unconvinced.

"By the way," I said. "Congratulations on becoming a Navigator."

"Thanks. They've put your name forward, too."

A FEW days later Lerouex and I were relieved by the new shift and we set off for the city. The repaired bridge was well under way and the mood at the site was optimistic. We now had ten yards of platform ready for the track-layers.

The horses were in use with the tree-felling crews, so Lerouex and I had to walk. Inland from the water the wind dropped and the temperature rose. We had both found it easy to forget how hot the land was.

After we had walked some distance I asked Lerouex, "How's Victoria?"

"She's well."

"I don't see her very often now."

"Neither do I."

I decided to say no more. Victoria was clearly an embarrassment to him. In the last few miles the news about our latest crossing hazard had inevitably leaked to the people as a whole and the Terminators—of whom Victoria was now a leading figure—had emerged as a vociferously critical faction. They claimed that they had eighty per cent of the non-guildsmen on their side and that the city should now be halted. I had been unable to attend Navigators' Council meetings recently, but I gathered that they

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were preoccupied with this problem. In another break with their former traditions they had started a second campaign to educate the non-guildsmen of the true nature of the world, but the essentially obscure and abstract explanations did not have the simple emotional appeal of the Terminators.

The Terminators had already scored one psychological victory. With the concentration of manpower on the building of the bridge, the work of track-laying had been left to one crew only and, although it was still under continuous propulsion, the city had been forced to slow down and was now a half-mile behind optimum. The militia had foiled an attempt by the Terminators to cut the cables, but not much was made of this. The real danger, fully appreciated by the Navigators, was the erosion of traditional political power within the city.

Victoria, and presumably the other overt Terminators, still carried out nominal tasks on behalf of the city, but perhaps it was a sign of their influence that many of the routines of the city were falling behind. Officially the Navigators put this down to the redeployment of so many men to the bridge, but few were in doubt as to the real causes.

Within guild circles resolution remained nearly unanimous. There was much complaining and some dissent with decisions, but in general there was a complete agreement that the bridge must be built. Halting the city would be unthinkable.

"Are you going to accept the duties of Navigator?" I asked Lerouex.

"I think so. I don't want to retire, but—"

"Retire? There's no question of that."

"Becoming a Navigator means retirement from active guild work," he said. "The Council believes that by bringing in men who have been playing an active role outside it will acquire a more forceful voice. That, incidentally, is why they want you on the Council."

"My work's up north," I said.

"So is mine. But we reach an age—"

"You shouldn't think of retiring," I said. "You're the best bridge man in the city."

"So they say. No one has the tactlessness to point out that my last three bridges have been unsuccessful."

"You mean the ones that were damaged at this present crossing?"

"Yes. And the new one will go as soon as there's another storm."

"You said yourself—"

"Helward—I'm not the man to build that bridge. It needs young blood. A new approach. Perhaps a ship is the answer."

Lerouex and I both understood what that admission meant to him. The Bridge-Builders guild was the proudest in the city. No bridge had ever failed.

We walked on.

ALMOST as soon as I arrived in the city I was fretting to return to the north. I did not like the present

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atmosphere—it was as if the people had replaced the old system of guild suppression with a self-inflicted blindness to reality. Terminator slogans were everywhere and crudely printed leaflets littered the corridors. People talked of the bridge and they spoke fearfully. Men returning from a workshift told of the failures, spoke of building a bridge toward a shore that could not be seen. Rumors, presumably originated by the Terminators, told of dozens of men being killed, of more took attacks.

In the Futures' room I was approached by Clausewitz, who was himself now a Navigator. He presented me with a formal letter from the Council of Navigators, naming a proposer (Clausewitz) and a seconder (McMahon) who requested me to join them.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't accept this."

"We need you, Helward. You're one of our most experienced men."

"Maybe. I'm needed on the bridge."

"You could do better work here."

"I don't think so."

Clausewitz took me aside and spoke confidentially.

"The Council is setting up a working party to deal with the Terminators," he said. "We want you on that."

"How can you deal with them? Suppress their voices?"

"No . . . we're going to have to compromise with them. They want to abandon the city for good. We're going to meet them halfway—and abandon the bridge."

I stared at him incredulously.

"I can't be a party to that," I said.

"Instead we build a ship. Not a big one, not nearly as complex as the city. Just large enough to get us to the other side. Then we'll rebuild the city."

I handed back the letter and turned away.

"No," I said. "That's my final word."

XXXV

I PREPARED to leave the city forthwith, determined to return to the north and carry out yet another survey of our problem. Other surveys had confirmed that a river was indeed what we were dealing with—the banks did not curve, so it was not a lake. Lakes may be circled, rivers have to be crossed. I remembered Lerouex's one optimistic remark, that the opposite bank might come into view as the river neared optimum. I knew a desperate hope—if I could locate that opposite shore there could be no further argument against the bridge.

I walked down through the city, realizing that by my words and intents I had made certain my actions. I had committed myself to the bridge, even though I had alienated myself from the instrument of its construction: the Council. In a sense I was on my own, in spirit and in fact. If a compromise were planned with the Terminators, I would have to subscribe to it eventually, but for the moment the

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bridge was my only tangible reality. however improbable.

I remembered something Blayne had once said. He described the city as a fanatical society and I questioned this. He said that one definition of a fanatic was a man who continued to struggle against odds when all hope was lost. The city had been struggling against odds since Destaine's day—behind it lay seven thousand miles of recorded history, no part of which had been easily won. It was impossible for mankind to survive in this environment, Blayne had said, yet the city continued to do so.

Perhaps I had inherited that fanaticism, for now I felt that only I maintained the city's sense of survival. For me, it was given substance in the building of the bridge, however hopeless that task might seem.

In one of the corridors I met Gelman Jase. He was now many subjective miles younger than I, because he had been north only infrequently.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Up north. There's nothing for me in the city at the moment."

"Aren't you going to the meeting?"

"Which meeting?"

"The Terminators."

"Are you going?"

My voice had obviously reflected the disapproval I felt, for he said defensively: "Yes. Why not? It's the first time they've come into the open."

"Are you with them?"

"No, but I want to hear what they say."

"And what if they persuade you?"

"That's not likely," said Jase.

"Then why go?"

Jase asked, "Is your mind totally closed, Helward?"

I opened my mouth to deny it—but said nothing. The fact was that my mind was closed.

"Don't you believe in another point of view?" Jase asked.

"Yes. But there's no debate on this bridge issue. They're in the wrong and you know it as well as I do."

"Just because a man's wrong doesn't mean he's a fool."

I said, "Gelman, you've been down past. You know what happens there. You know the city would be taken there by the movement of the ground. Surely there's no question about what the city should do."

"I know. But they have the ear of a large percentage of the people. We should hear them out."

"They're enemies of the city's security."

"Okay—but to defeat an enemy one should know him. I'm going to the meeting because this is the first time their views are being publicly expressed. I want to know what I'm up against. If we're going to go across that bridge, it's going to be people like me who will see us across. If the Terminators have got an alternative, I want to hear it. If not, I want to know it."

"I'm going up north," I said.

Jase shook his head. We argued a while longer and then we went to the meeting.

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The work on rebuilding the creche had been abandoned some miles back. The damage had long since been cleared, leaving bare the broad metal base of the city, open on three sides to the countryside. At the northern side of this area, against the bulk of the rest of the city, some reconstruction work had been done, and the timber facings afforded the speakers a suitable background and a slightly raised platform from which to address the crowd.

As Jase and I came out of the last building and walked across the space a considerable number of people were already there. I was surprised at the size of the turnout—the resident population of the city had been considerably depleted by the men drafted to work on the bridge, but at a rough estimate it seemed to me that at least three or four hundred people were gathered around the platform.

A speech was already in progress and the crowd was listening without much response. The main text of the speech—made by a man I recognized as one of the food-synthesists—was a description of the physical environment through which the city was currently passing.

"—the soil is rich and there is a good chance that we could grow our own crops. We have abundant water, both locally and to the north of us." Laughter. "The climate is agreeable. The local people are not hostile, nor need we make them so—"

After a few minutes he stood down to a ripple of applause. Without preamble the next speaker came forward—Victoria.

"People of the city, we face another crisis brought upon us by the Council of Navigators. For thousands of miles we have been making our way across this land, indulging ourselves in all that is inhuman to stay alive. Our way of staying alive has been to move forward, toward the north. Behind us—"she waved her hand to encompass the broad stretch of countryside that lay beyond the southern edge of the platform—"is that period of our existence. Ahead of us they tell us there is a river. One we must cross to continue to ensure our survival. What is beyond that river they do not tell us, because they do not know—"

Victoria spoke for a long time and I confess I was prejudiced against her from her first words. They sounded to me like cheap rhetoric, but the crowd seemed to appreciate them. Perhaps I was not as indifferent as I supposed, for when she described the building of the bridge and threw in the accusation that many men had died, I started forward to protest. Jase caught my arm.

"Helward—don't."

"She's talking rubbish," I said, but already a few voices in the crowd shouted that she was merely spreading rumor. Victoria conceded the point neatly, but added that there was probably more going on at the bridge site than was generally known and this speculation was greeted with some approval.

Victoria brought her speech to

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an unexpected conclusion.

"I say that not only is this bridge unnecessary, but that it is also dangerous. In this I have an expert opinion. As many of you know, my father is Chief Guildsman of the Bridge-Builders. He is the man who designed the bridge. I ask you now to listen to what he has to say."

"God—she can't do that," I said.

Jase said, "Lerouex's not a Terminator."

"I know. But he's lost faith."

Bridges Lerouex was already on the platform. He stood beside his daughter, waiting for the applause to die down. He did not look directly at the crowd, but stared at the floor. He looked tired, old and beaten.

"Come on, Jase. I'm not going to watch him be humiliated."

Jase looked at me uncertainly. Lerouex was preparing to speak.

I pushed forward through the crowd, wanting to be away before he said anything. I had learned to respect Lerouex and did not wish to be present in his moment of defeat.

A few yards forward I stopped again.

Standing behind Victoria and her father, I had recognized someone else. For a moment I couldn't place either the name or the face—then both came together. Elizabeth Khan.

I was shocked to see her again. She had left many miles ago—at least eighteen, city time, many more in my own subjective time. After she had left I had tried to put her from my mind.

Lerouex had started to address the crowd. He spoke softly and his words did not carry.

I was staring at Elizabeth. I knew why she was there. She was going to speak after Lerouex had finished humiliating himself. I already knew what she would say.

I started toward the platform, but Jase caught my arm.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"That girl," I said. "I know her. She's from outside the city. We mustn't let her speak."

People around us were telling us to be quiet. I struggled to release myself from Jase but he held me back.

Suddenly there was a burst of applause and I realized that Lerouex had finished.

I said to Jase, "Look—you've got to help me. You don't know who that girl is."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Blayne coming toward us.

"Helward—have you seen who's here?"

"Blayne, for God's sake help me—"

I struggled again and Jase fought to hold me. Blayne moved quickly to take my other arm. Together they pulled me back and out of the crowd.

"Listen, Helward," said Jase. "Stay here and listen to her."

"I know what she's going to say—"

"Then allow others to hear."

Victoria stepped forward to the edge of the platform.

"People of the city, we have one more person to speak to you. She is not known to many of us, because

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she is not of our city. But what she has to say is of great importance and afterward there will no longer be any doubt in your minds as to what we must do."

She raised her hand and Elizabeth stepped forward.

ELIZABETH spoke softly, but her voice carried clearly.

"I am a stranger to most of you here," she said, "because I was not born as you were within the walls of the city. However, you and I are of one kind: we are human and we are of a planet called Earth. You have survived in this city for nearly two hundred years, or seven thousand miles by your way of measuring time. About you has been a world in anarchy and ruins. The people are ignorant, uneducated, stricken with poverty. But not all people of this world are in this state. I am from England, a country where we are beginning to reconstruct a kind of civilization. There are other countries, too, bigger and more powerful than England. So your stable and organized existence is not unique."

She paused, testing the reaction of the crowd so far. There was silence.

"I came across your city by accident and lived here for a while within your transfer section." There was some surprised reaction to this. "I have talked with some of you and I know how you live. When I left the city I returned to England. I've spent nearly six months there, trying to learn to understand your city and its history. I know much more now than I did on my first visit."

She paused again. Somewhere in the crowd a man shouted: "England is on Earth!"

Elizabeth did not respond. Instead she said, "I have a question. Is there anyone here responsible for the city's engines?"

After a short silence Jase said, "I am a Traction guildsman."

Heads turned in our direction.

"Then you can tell us what powers the engines."

"A nuclear reactor."

"Describe how the fuel is inserted."

Jase released me and moved to one side. I felt Blayne's hold on me loosen and I could have escaped him. But like everyone else's, my attention had been caught by the curious questions.

Jase said, "I don't know. I have never seen it done."

"Then before you can stop your city, you must find out."

ELIZABETH moved back and spoke quietly to Victoria. A moment later she came forward again.

"Your reactor is no such thing. Unwittingly, the men you call your Traction guildsmen have been misleading you. The reactor is not functioning and has not done so for thousands of miles."

Blayne said to Jase, "Well?"

"She's talking nonsense."

"*Do* you know what fuels it?"

"No," said Jase quietly, although many of the people around us were listening. "Our guild believes that

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it will run indefinitely without attention."

"Your reactor is no such thing," Elizabeth said again.

I said, "Don't listen to her. The fact that we have electricity—power—means the reactor is working—"

From the platform Elizabeth said, "Listen to me—" and began to tell us about Destaine. I listened with the others.

Francis Destaine was a physicist who had lived and worked in Britain, on Earth planet. He had lived at a time when Earth had been running critically short of electrical energy. Elizabeth recited the reasons, which were essentially that fossil fuels were burned to provide heat, which was converted into energy. When the fuel deposits ran out there would be no more energy.

Destaine, Elizabeth said, claimed to have devised a process whereby apparently unlimited amounts of energy could be produced without any kind of fuel. His work had been discredited by most scientists. In due course the energy derived from fossil fuels had run out and there had followed on Earth planet a long period now known as the Crash. It had brought to an end the advanced technological civilization that had dominated Earth.

She said that the people on Earth were now beginning to rebuild and Destaine's work was instrumental in this. His process as originally outlined had been crude and dangerous, but a later, more sophisticated development was manageable and successful.

"What has this to do with halting the city?" someone shouted.

Elizabeth said, "Listen."

DESTAINE, she said, had discovered a generator that created an artificial field of energy which in close proximity to another similar field caused a flow of electricity. His early critics had based their opposition on the fact that the discovery had no practical use as the two generators consumed more electricity than they produced.

Destaine at first had been unable to obtain either financial or intellectual support for his work. Even when he claimed to have discovered a natural field—a translateration window, he called it—and could thus produce his effect without the need of a second generator, he was still ignored.

He claimed that this natural window of potential energy was moving slowly across the surface of the Earth, following a line Elizabeth described as the great circle.

Destaine eventually had managed to raise enough money from private sponsors to build a mobile research station. With a large team of hired assistants he set off for the Kuantung province of southern China where, he claimed, the natural translateration window existed.

Elizabeth said, "Destaine was never heard from again."

ELIZABETH said that we were on Earth planet and had never left it—and that our perception of it was distorted by the translateration generator which, self-powering as long as it was running, continued to produce the field about us.

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She said that Destaine had ignored the side effects other scientists had warned him of—that the force field could permanently affect perception and might have genetic and hereditary effects.

She said that the translateration window still existed on Earth and that many others had been found.

She said that the window Destaine had discovered in China was the one our own generator was still tapping.

That following the great circle it had traveled through Asia, through Europe.

That we were now at the edge of Europe and that before us lay an ocean several thousand miles wide.

She said . . . and the people listened . . .

ELIZABETH finished speaking. Jase walked slowly through the crowd toward her.

I headed back toward the entrance to the rest of the city. I passed within a few feet of the platform and Elizabeth noticed me.

She called out, "Helward—"

I took no notice but pushed on through the crowd and into the interior of the city. I went down a flight of steps, walked through the passageway beneath the city and out again into daylight.

I headed north, moving between the tracks and cables.

XXXVI

HALF an hour later I heard the sound of a horse and turned. Elizabeth caught up with me.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Back to the bridge."

"Don't. There's no need. The Traction guild has disconnected the generator."

I pointed up at the sun. "And that is now a sphere."

"Yes."

I walked on.

ELIZABETH repeated what she had said before. She pleaded with me to see reason. She said again and again that it was only my perception of the world that was distorted.

I kept my silence.

She had not been down past. She had never been farther away from the city than a few miles north or south. She hadn't been with me when I saw the realities of this world.

Was it perception that changed the physical dimensions of Lucia, Rosario and Caterina? Our bodies had been locked in sexual embrace—I knew the real effects of that perception. Was it the baby's perception that had made it reject Rosario's milk? Was it only my perception that caused the girls' city-made clothes to tear as their bodies distorted inside them?

WHY didn't you tell me what you just said when you were in the city before?" I asked.

"Because I didn't know then. I had to go back to England. And you know something? No one in England cared. I tried to find someone, anyone, who could be made to

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find some concern for you and your city—but no one was interested. There's a lot going on in this world—big and exciting changes are taking place. No one cares about the city and its people."

"You came back," I said.

"I had seen your city myself. I knew what you and the others were planning to do. I had to find out about Destaine—someone had to explain translateration to me. It's a dull, everyday technology now, but I didn't know how it worked."

"That's self-evident," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"If the generator's off, as you say, then there's no further problem. I just have to keep looking at the sun and telling myself that it's a sphere, whatever else it might look like."

"But it's only your perception," she said.

"And I perceive that you are wrong. I know what I see."

"But you don't."

A few minutes later a large crowd of men passed us, heading south toward the city. Most of them were carrying the possessions they had taken with them to the bridge site. Not one of them acknowledged us.

I walked faster, trying to leave her behind. She followed, leading her horse by its harness.

THE bridge site was deserted. I walked out on the bridge. Beneath me the water was calm and clear, although waves still broke on the bank behind me.

I turned and looked back. Elizabeth was standing near the water's edge, watching me. I stared at her for a few seconds, then reached down and took off my boots. I moved away from her, to the very end of the bridge.

I looked at the sun. It was dipping down toward the northeastern horizon. It was beautiful in its own way. A graceful, enigmatic shape, far more aesthetically satisfying than a simple sphere. My only regret was that I had never been able to draw it successfully.

I dove from the bridge head first. The water was cold, but not unpleasantly so. As soon as I surfaced an incoming wave pushed me back against the nearest bridge piling and I kicked myself away from it. With strong, steady strokes I swam northward.

I was curious to know if Elizabeth was still watching, so I turned on my back and floated. She had moved away from the ridge and was now riding her horse slowly along the uneven surface of the bridge. When she reached the end she stopped.

She sat in the saddle and looked in my direction.

I continued to tread water, waiting to see if she would make any gesture toward me. The sun was bathing her in a rich yellow light, stark against the deep blue of the sky behind her.

I turned, and looked toward the north. The sun was setting, and already most of its broad disk was out of sight. I waited until its northern spire of light had slipped down below the horizon. As darkness fell I swam back through the surf to the beach. ★

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